



THE  
OLD WIVES' TALE

A NOVEL

BY

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AUTHOR OF "THE GRAND HABYLLIN HOTEL," "A GREAT MAN,"  
"BACKED AND FORTH AND LOVE," ETC.

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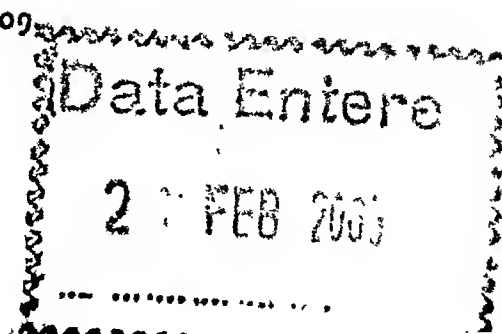
IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. I

LEIPZIG

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1909



BA

Accession

15153

Date of

W. V. L.

BVCL. 15153



823.91

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# THE OLD WIVES' TALE.

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## BOOK I.

MRS. BAINES.

### CHAPTER I.

THE SQUARE.

#### I.

THOSE two girls, Constance and Sophia Baines, paid no heed to the manifold interest of their situation, of which, indeed, they had never been conscious. They were, for example, established almost precisely on the fifty-third parallel of latitude. A little way to the north of them, in the creases of a hill famous for its religious orgies, rose the river Trent, the calm and characteristic stream of middle England. Somewhat further northwards, in the near neighbourhood of the highest public-house in the realm, rose two lesser rivers, the Dane and the Dove, which, quarrelling in early infancy, turned their backs on each other, and, the one by favour of the Weaver and the other by favour of the Trent, watered between them the whole width of England, and poured themselves respectively into the Irish Sea and the German



Ocean. What a county of modest, unnoticed rivers! What a natural, simple county, content to fix its boundaries by these tortuous island brooks, with their comfortable names—Trent, Mease, Dove, Tern, Dane, Mees, Stour, Tame, and even hasty Severn! Not that the Severn is suitable to the county! In the county excess is deprecated. The county is happy in not exciting remark. It is content that Shropshire should possess that swollen bump, the Wicken, and that the exaggerated wildness of the Peak should lie over its border. It does not desire to be a pancake like Cheshire. It has everything that England has, including thirty miles of Watling Street, and England can show nothing more beautiful and nothing uglier than the works of nature and the works of man to be seen within the limits of the county. It is England in little, lost in the midst of England, unsung by searchers after the extreme, perhaps occasionally somewhat sore at this neglect, but how proud in the instinctive cognizance of its representative features and traits!

Constance and Sophia, busy with the intense pre-occupations of youth, recked not of such matters. They were surrounded by the county. On every side the fields and moors of Staffordshire, intersected by roads and lanes, railways, watercourses and telegraph-lines, patterned by hedges, ornamented and made respectable by halls and genteel parks, enlivened by villages at the intersections, and warmly surveyed by the sun, spread out undulating. And trains were rushing round curves in deep cuttings, and carts and waggons trotting and jingling on the yellow roads, and long, narrow boats passing in a leisure majestic and infinite over the surface of the stolid canals, the rivers had only themselves to support, for Staffordshire rivers have remained virgin of keels to this day.

One could imagine the messages concerning prices, sudden death, and horses, in their flight through the wires under the feet of birds. In the inns Utopians were shouting the universe into order over beer, and in the halls and parks the dignity of England was being preserved in a fitting manner. The villages were full of women who did nothing but fight against dirt and hunger, and repair the effects of friction on clothes. Thousands of labourers were in the fields, but the fields were so broad and numerous that this scattered multitude was totally lost therein. The cuckoo was much more perceptible than man, dominating whole square miles with his resounding call. And on the airy moors heath-larks played in the ineffaceable mule-tracks that had served centuries before even the Romans thought of Watling Street. In short, the usual daily life of the county was proceeding with all its immense variety and importance; but though Constance and Sophia were in it they were not of it.

The fact is, that while in the county they were also in the district; and no person who lives in the district, even if he should be old and have nothing to do but reflect upon things in general, ever thinks about the county. So far as the county goes, the district might almost as well be in the middle of the Sahara. It ignores the county, save that it uses it nonchalantly sometimes as leg-stretcher on holiday afternoons, as a man may use his back garden. It has nothing in common with the county; it is richly sufficient to itself. Nevertheless, its self-sufficiency and the true salt savour of its life can only be appreciated by picturing it hemmed in by county. It lies on the face of the county like an insignificant stain, like a dark Pleiades in a green and empty sky. And Hanbridge has the shape of a horse and its rider,

Bursley of half a donkey, Knype of a pair of trousers, Longshaw of an octopus, and little Turnhill of a beetle. The Five Towns seem to cling together for safety. Yet the idea of clinging together for safety would make them laugh. They are unique and indispensable. From the north of the county right down to the south they alone stand for civilisation, applied science, organised manufacture, and the century—until you come to Wolverhampton. They are unique and indispensable because you cannot drink tea out of a tea-cup without the aid of the Five Towns; because you cannot eat a meal in decency without the aid of the Five Towns. For this the architecture of the Five Towns is an architecture of ovens and chimneys; for this its atmosphere is as black as its mud; for this it burns and smokes all night, so that Longshaw has been compared to hell; for this it is unlearned in the ways of agriculture, never having seen corn except as packing straw and in quartern loaves; for this, on the other hand, it comprehends the mysterious habits of fire and pure, sterile earth; for this it lives crammed together in slippery streets where the housewife must change white window-curtains at least once a fortnight if she wishes to remain respectable; for this it gets up in the mass at six a.m., winter and summer, and goes to bed when the public-houses close; for this it exists—that you may drink tea out of a tea-cup and toy with a chop on a plate. All the everyday crockery used in the kingdom is made in the Five Towns—all, and much besides. A district capable of such gigantic manufacture, of such a perfect monopoly—and which finds energy also to produce coal and iron and great men—may be an insignificant stain on a county, considered geographically, but it is surely well justified in treating

the county as its back garden once a week, and in blindly ignoring it the rest of the time.

Even the majestic thought that whenever and wherever in all England a woman washes up, she washes up the product of the district; that whenever and wherever in all England a plate is broken the fracture means new business for the district—even this majestic thought had probably never occurred to either of the girls. The fact is, that while in the Five Towns they were also in the Square, Bursley and the Square ignored the staple manufacture as perfectly as the district ignored the county. Bursley has the honours of antiquity in the Five Towns. No industrial development can ever rob it of its superiority in age, which makes it absolutely sure in its conceit. And the time will never come when the other towns—let them swell and bluster as they may—will not pronounce the name of Bursley as one pronounces the name of one's mother. Add to this that the Square was the centre of Bursley's retail trade (which scorned the staple as something wholesale, vulgar, and assuredly filthy), and you will comprehend the importance and the self-isolation of the Square in the scheme of the created universe. There you have it, embedded in the district, and the district embedded in the county, and the county lost and dreaming in the heart of England!

The Square was named after St. Luke. The Evangelist might have been startled by certain phenomena in his square, but, except in Wakes Week, when the shocking always happened, St. Luke's Square lived in a manner passably saintly—though it contained five public-houses. It contained five public-houses, a bank, a barber's, a confectioner's, three grocers', two chemists', an ironmonger's, a clothier's, and five drapers'. These were all the cata-

logue. St. Luke's Square had no room for minor establishments. The aristocracy of the Square undoubtedly consisted of the drapers (for the bank was impersonal); and among the five the shop of Baines stood supreme. No business establishment could possibly be more respected than that of Mr. Baines was respected. And though John Baines had been bedridden for a dozen years, he still lived on the lips of admiring, ceremonious burgesses as "our honoured fellow-townsmen." He deserved his reputation.

The Baines's shop, to make which three dwellings had at intervals been thrown into one, lay at the bottom of the Square. It formed about one-third of the south side of the Square, the remainder being made up of Critchlow's (chemist), the clothier's, and the Hanover Spirit Vaults. ("Vaults" was a favourite synonym of the public-house in the Square. Only two of the public-houses were crude public-houses: the rest were "vaults.") It was a composite building of three storeys, in blackish-crimson brick, with a projecting shop-front and, above and behind that, two rows of little windows. On the sash of each window was a red cloth roll stuffed with sawdust, to prevent draughts; plain white blinds descended about six inches from the top of each window. There were no curtains to any of the windows save one; this was the window of the drawing-room, on the first floor at the corner of the Square and King Street. Another window, on the second storey, was peculiar, in that it had neither blind nor pad, and was very dirty; this was the window of an unused room that had a separate staircase to itself, the staircase being barred by a door always locked. Constance and Sophia had lived in continual expectation of the abnormal issuing from that mysterious

room, which was next to their own. But they were disappointed. The room had no shameful secret except the incompetence of the architect who had made one house out of three; it was just an empty, unemployable room. The building had also a considerable frontage on King Street, where, behind the shop, was sheltered the parlour, with a large window and a door that led directly by two steps into the street. A strange peculiarity of the shop was that it bore no sign-board. Once it had had a large sign-board which a memorable gale had blown into the Square. Mr. Baines had decided not to replace it. He had always objected to what he called "puffing," and for this reason would never hear of such a thing as a clearance sale. The hatred of "puffing" grew on him until he came to regard even a sign as "puffing." Uninformed persons who wished to find Baines's must ask and learn. For Mr. Baines, to have replaced the sign would have been to condone, yea, to participate in, the modern craze for unscrupulous self-advertisement. This abstention of Mr. Baines's from indulgence in sign-boards was somehow accepted by the more thoughtful members of the community as evidence that the height of Mr. Baines's principles was greater even than they had imagined.

Constance and Sophia were the daughters of this credit to human nature. He had no other children.

## II.

They pressed their noses against the window of the show-room, and gazed down into the Square as perpendicularly as the projecting front of the shop would allow. The show-room was over the millinery and silken half of the shop. Over the woollen and shirting half were the

drawing-room and the chief bedroom. . When in quest of articles of coquetry, you mounted from the shop by a curving stair, and your head gradually rose level with a large apartment having a mahogany counter in front of the window and along one side, yellow linoleum on the floor, many cardboard boxes, a magnificent hinged cheval glass, and two chairs. The window-sill being lower than the counter, there was a gulf between the panes and the back of the counter, into which important articles such as scissors, pencils, chalk, and artificial flowers were continually disappearing: another proof of the architect's incompetence.

The girls could only press their noses against the window by kneeling on the counter, and this they were doing. Constance's nose was snub, but agreeably so. Sophia had a fine Roman nose; she was a beautiful creature, beautiful and handsome at the same time. They were both of them rather like racehorses, quivering with delicate, sensitive, and luxuriant life; exquisite, enchanting proof of the circulation of the blood; innocent, artful, roguish, prim, gushing, ignorant, and miraculously wise. Their ages were sixteen and fifteen; it is an epoch when, if one is frank, one must admit that one has nothing to learn: one has learnt simply everything in the previous six months.

"There she goes!" exclaimed Sophia.

Up the Square, from the corner of King Street, passed a woman in a new bonnet with pink strings, and a new blue dress that sloped at the shoulders and grew to a vast circumference at the hem. Through the silent sunlit solitude of the Square (for it was Thursday afternoon, and all the shops shut except the confectioner's and one chemist's) this bonnet and this dress floated northwards in search of romance, under the relentless eyes of Con-

stance and Sophia. Within them, somewhere, was the soul of Maggie, domestic servant at Baines's. Maggie had been at the shop since before the creation of Constance and Sophia. She lived seventeen hours of each day in an underground kitchen and larder, and the other seven in an attic, never going out except to chapel on Sunday evenings, and once a month on Thursday afternoons. "Followers" were most strictly forbidden to her; but on rare occasions an aunt from Longshaw was permitted as a tremendous favour to see her in the subterranean den. Everybody, including herself, considered that she had a good "place," and was well treated. It was undeniable, for instance, that she was allowed to fall in love exactly as she chose, provided she did not "carry on" in the kitchen or the yard. And as a fact, Maggie had fallen in love. In seventeen years she had been engaged eleven times. No one could conceive how that ugly and powerful organism could softly languish to the undoing of even a butty-collier, nor why, having caught a man in her sweet coils, she could ever be imbecile enough to set him free. There are, however, mysteries in the souls of Maggies. The drudge had probably been affianced oftener than any woman in Bursley. Her employers were so accustomed to an interesting announcement that for years they had taken to saying naught in reply but "Really, Maggie!" Engagements and tragic partings were Maggie's pastime. Fixed otherwise, she might have studied the piano instead.

"No gloves, of course!" Sophia criticised.

"Well, you can't expect her to have gloves," said Constance.

Then a pause, as the bonnet and dress neared the top of the Square.



"Supposing she turns round and sees us?" Constance suggested.

"I don't care if she does," said Sophia, with a haughtiness almost impassioned; and her head trembled slightly.

There were, as usual, several loafers at the top of the Square, in the corner between the bank and the "Marquis of Granby." And one of these loafers stepped forward and shook hands with an obviously willing Maggie. Clearly it was a rendezvous, open, unashamed. The twelfth victim had been selected by the virgin of forty, whose kiss would not have melted lard! The couple disappeared together down Oldcastle Street.

"*Well!*" cried Constance. "Did you ever see such a thing?"

While Sophia, short of adequate words, flushed and bit her lip.

With the profound, instinctive cruelty of youth, Constance and Sophia had assembled in their favourite haunt, the show-room, expressly to deride Maggie in her new clothes. They obscurely thought that a woman so ugly and soiled as Maggie was had no right to possess new clothes. Even her desire to take the air of a Thursday afternoon seemed to them unnatural and somewhat reprehensible. Why should she want to stir out of her kitchen? As for her tender yearnings, they positively grudged these to Maggie. That Maggie should give rein to chaste passion was more than grotesque; it was offensive and wicked. But let it not for an instant be doubted that they were nice, kind-hearted, well-behaved, and delightful girls! Because they were. They were not angels.

"It's too ridiculous!" said Sophia, severely. She had youth, beauty, and rank in her favour. And to her it really was ridiculous.

"Poor old Maggie!" Constance murmured. Constance was foolishly good-natured, a perfect manufactory of excuses for other people; and her benevolence was eternally rising up and overpowering her reason.

"What time did mother say she should be back?" Sophia asked.

"Not until supper."

"Oh! Hallelujah!" Sophia burst out, clasping her hands in joy. And they both slid down from the counter just as if they had been little boys, and not, as their mother called them, "great girls."

"Let's go and play the Osborne quadrilles," Sophia suggested (the Osborne quadrilles being a series of dances arranged to be performed on drawing-room pianos by four jewelled hands).

"I couldn't think of it," said Constance, with a precocious gesture of seriousness. In that gesture, and in her tone, was something which conveyed to Sophia: "Sophia, how can you be so utterly blind to the gravity of our fleeting existence as to ask me to go and strum the piano with you?" Yet a moment before she had been a little boy.

"Why not?" Sophia demanded.

"I shall never have another chance like to-day for getting on with this," said Constance, picking up a bag from the counter.

She sat down and took from the bag a piece of loosely woven canvas, on which she was embroidering a bunch of roses in coloured wools. The canvas had once been stretched on a frame, but now, as the delicate labour of the petals and leaves was done, and nothing remained to do but the monotonous background, Constance was content to pin the stuff to her knee. With the long needle and several skeins of mustard-tinted wool, she bent over the

canvas and resumed the filling-in of the tiny squares. The whole design was in squares—the gradations of red and greens, the curves of the smallest buds—all was contrived in squares, with a result that mimicked a fragment of uncompromising Axminster carpet. Still, the fine texture of the wool, the regular and rapid grace of those fingers moving incessantly at back and front of the canvas, the gentle sound of the wool as it passed through the holes, and the intent, youthful earnestness of that lowered gaze, excused and invested with charm an activity which, on artistic grounds, could not possibly be justified. The canvas was destined to adorn a gilt firescreen in the drawing-room, and also to form a birthday gift to Mrs. Baines from her elder daughter. But whether the enterprise was as secret from Mrs. Baines as Constance hoped, none save Mrs. Baines knew.

"Con," murmured Sophia, "you're too sickening sometimes."

"Well," said Constance, blandly, "it's no use pretending that this hasn't got to be finished before we go back to school, because it has."

Sophia wandered about, a prey ripe for the Evil One. "Oh," she exclaimed joyously—even ecstatically—looking behind the cheval glass, "here's mother's new skirt! Miss Dunn's been putting the gimp on it! Oh, mother, what a proud thing you will be!"

Constance heard swishings behind the glass. "What are you doing, Sophia?"

"Nothing."

"You surely aren't putting that skirt on?"

"Why not?"

"You'll catch it finely, I can tell you!"

Without further defence, Sophia sprang out from be-

hind the immense glass. She had already shed a notable part of her own costume, and the flush of mischief was in her face. She ran across to the other side of the room and examined carefully a large coloured print that was affixed to the wall.

This print represented fifteen sisters, all of the same height and slimness of figure, all of the same age—about twenty-five or so, and all with exactly the same haughty and bored beauty. That they were in truth sisters was clear from the facial resemblance between them; their demeanour indicated that they were princesses, offspring of some impossibly prolific king and queen. Those hands had never toiled, nor had those features ever relaxed from the smile of courts. The princesses moved in a landscape of marble steps and verandahs, with a bandstand and strange trees in the distance. One was in a riding-habit, another in evening attire, another dressed for tea, another for the theatre; another seemed to be ready to go to bed. One held a little girl by the hand; it could not have been her own little girl, for these princesses were far beyond human passions. Where had she obtained the little girl? Why was one sister going to the theatre, another to tea, another to the stable, and another to bed? Why was one in a heavy mantle, and another sheltering from the sun's rays under a parasol? The picture was drenched in mystery, and the strangest thing about it was that all these highnesses were apparently content with the most ridiculous and out-moded fashions. Absurd hats, with veils flying behind; absurd bonnets, fitting close to the head, and spotted; absurd coiffures that nearly lay on the nape; absurd, clumsy sleeves; absurd waists, almost above the elbow's level; absurd scolloped jackets! And the skirts! What a sight were those skirts! They were

nothing but vast decorated pyramids; on the summit of each was stuck the upper half of a princess. It was astounding that princesses should consent to be so preposterous and so uncomfortable. But Sophia perceived nothing uncanny in the picture, which bore the legend: "Newest summer fashions from Paris. Gratis supplement to *Myra's Journal*." Sophia had never imagined anything more stylish, lovely, and dashing than the raiment of the fifteen princesses.

For Constance and Sophia had the disadvantage of living in the middle ages. The crinoline had not quite reached its full circumference, and the dress-improver had not even been thought of. In all the Five Towns there was not a public bath, nor a free library, nor a municipal park, nor a telephone, nor yet a board-school. People had not understood the vital necessity of going away to the seaside every year. Bishop Colenso had just staggered Christianity by his shameless notions on the Pentateuch. Half Lancashire was starving on account of the American war. Garrotting was the chief amusement of the homicidal classes. Incredible as it may appear, there was nothing but a horse-tram running between Bursley and Hanbridge—and that only twice an hour; and between the other towns no stage of any kind! One went to Longshaw as one now goes to Pekin. It was an era so dark and backward that one might wonder how people could sleep in their beds at night for thinking about their sad state.

"Sophia!"

Constance stayed her needle, and, without lifting her head, gazed, with eyes raised from the wool-work, motionless at the posturing figure of her sister. It was sacrilege that she was witnessing, a prodigious irreverence. She was conscious of an expectation that punishment would

instantly fall on this daring, impious child. But she, who never felt these mad, amazing impulses, could nevertheless only smile fearfully.

"Sophia!" she breathed, with an intensity of alarm that merged into condoning admiration. "Whatever will you do next?"

Sophia's lovely flushed face crowned the extraordinary structure like a blossom, scarcely controlling its laughter. She was as tall as her mother, and as imperious, as crested, and proud; and in spite of the pigtail, the girlish semi-circular comb, and the loose foal-like limbs, she could support as well as her mother the majesty of the gimp-embroidered dress. Her eyes sparkled with all the challenges of the untried virgin as she minced about the showroom. Abounding life inspired her movements. The confident and fierce joy of youth shone on her brow. "What thing on earth equals me?" she seemed to demand with enchanting and yet ruthless arrogance. She was the daughter of a respected, bedridden draper in an insignificant town, lost in the central labyrinth of England, if you like; yet what manner of man, confronted with her, would or could have denied her naïve claim to dominion? She stood, in her mother's hoops, for the desire of the world. And in the innocence of her soul she knew it! The heart of a young girl mysteriously speaks and tells her of her power long ere she can use her power. If she can find nothing else to subdue, you may catch her in the early years subduing a gate-post or drawing homage from an empty chair. Sophia's experimental victim was Constance, with suspended needle and soft glance that shot out from the lowered face.

Then Sophia fell, in stepping backwards; the pyramid was overbalanced; great distended rings of silk trembled

and swayed gigantically on the floor, and Sophia's small feet lay like the feet of a doll on the rim of the largest circle, which curved and arched above them like a cavern's mouth. The abrupt transition of her features from assured pride to ludicrous astonishment and alarm was comical enough to have sent into wild uncharitable laughter any creature less humane than Constance. But Constance sprang to her, a single embodied instinct of benevolence, with her snub nose, and tried to raise her.

"Oh, Sophia!" she cried compassionately—that voice seemed not to know the tones of reproof—"I do hope you've not messed it, because mother would be so——"

The words were interrupted by the sound of groans beyond the door leading to the bedrooms. The groans, indicating direst physical torment, grew louder. The two girls stared, wonderstruck and afraid, at the door, Sophia with her dark head raised, and Constance with her arms round Sophia's waist. The door opened, letting in a much-magnified sound of groans, and there entered a youngish, undersized man, who was frantically clutching his head in his hands and contorting all the muscles of his face. On perceiving the sculptural group of two prone, interlocked girls, one enveloped in a crinoline, and the other with a wool-work bunch of flowers pinned to her knee, he jumped back, ceased groaning, arranged his face, and seriously tried to pretend that it was not he who had been vocal in anguish, that, indeed, he was just passing as a casual, ordinary wayfarer through the showroom to the shop below. He blushed darkly; and the girls also blushed.

"Oh, I beg pardon, I'm sure!" said this youngish man, suddenly; and with a swift turn he disappeared whence he had come.

He was Mr. Povey, a person universally esteemed, both within and without the shop, the surrogate of bed-ridden Mr. Baines, the unfailing comfort and stand-by of Mrs. Baines, the fount and radiating centre of order and discipline in the shop; a quiet, diffident, secretive, tedious, and obstinate youngish man, absolutely faithful, absolutely efficient in his sphere; without brilliance, without distinction; perhaps rather little-minded, certainly narrow-minded; but what a force in the shop! The shop was inconceivable without Mr. Povey. He was under twenty and not out of his apprenticeship when Mr. Baines had been struck down, and he had at once proved his worth. Of the assistants, he alone slept in the house. His bedroom was next to that of his employer; there was a door between the two chambers, and two steps led down from the larger to the less.

The girls regained their feet, Sophia with Constance's help. It was not easy to right a capsized crinoline. They both began to laugh nervously, with a trace of hysteria.

"I thought he'd gone to the dentist's," whispered Constance.

Mr. Povey's toothache had been causing anxiety in the microcosm for two days, and it had been clearly understood at dinner that Thursday morning that Mr. Povey was to set forth to Oulsnam Bros., the dentists at Hillport, without any delay. Only on Thursdays and Sundays did Mr. Povey dine with the family. On other days he dined later, by himself, but at the family table, when Mrs. Baines or one of the assistants could "relieve" him in the shop. Before starting out to visit her elder sister at Axe, Mrs. Baines had insisted to Mr. Povey that he had eaten practically nothing but "slops" for twenty-four hours, and that if he was not careful she would have him



on her hands. He had replied, in his quietest, most sagacious, matter-of-fact tone—the tone that carried weight with all who heard it—that he had only been waiting for Thursday afternoon, and should of course go instantly to Oulsnam's and have the thing attended to in a proper manner. He had even added that persons who put off going to the dentist's were simply sowing trouble for themselves.

None could possibly have guessed that Mr. Povey was afraid of going to the dentist's. But such was the case. He had not dared to set forth. The paragon of common-sense, pictured by most people as being somehow unliable to human frailties, could not yet screw himself up to the point of ringing a dentist's door-bell.

"He did look funny," said Sophia. "I wonder what he thought. I couldn't help laughing!"

Constance made no answer; but when Sophia had resumed her own clothes, and it was ascertained beyond doubt that the new dress had not suffered, and Constance herself was calmly stitching again, she said, poising her needle as she had poised it to watch Sophia:

"I was just wondering whether something oughtn't to be done for Mr. Povey."

"What?" Sophia demanded.

"Has he gone back to his bedroom?"

"Let's go and listen," said Sophia the adventuress.

They went, through the showroom door, past the foot of the stairs leading to the second storey, down the long corridor broken in the middle by two steps and carpeted with a narrow bordered carpet whose parallel lines increased its apparent length. They went on tiptoe, sticking close to one another. Mr. Povey's door was slightly ajar. They listened; not a sound.

"Mr. Povey!" Constance coughed discreetly.

No reply. It was Sophia who pushed the door open. Constance made an elderly prim plucking gesture at Sophia's bare arm, but she followed Sophia gingerly into the forbidden room, which was, however, empty. The bed had been ruffled, and on it lay a book, "The Harvest of a Quiet Eye."

"Harvest of a quiet tooth!" Sophia whispered, giggling very low.

"Hsh!" Constance put her lips forward.

From the next room came a regular, muffled, oratorical sound, as though someone had begun many years ago to address a meeting and had forgotten to leave off and never would leave off. They were familiar with the sound, and they quitted Mr. Povey's chamber in fear of disturbing it. At the same moment Mr. Povey reappeared, this time in the drawing-room doorway at the other extremity of the long corridor. He seemed to be trying ineffectually to flee from his tooth as a murderer tries to flee from his conscience.

"Oh, Mr. Povey!" said Constance quickly—for he had surprised them coming out of his bedroom; "we were just looking for you."

"To see if we could do anything for you," Sophia added.

"Oh no, thanks!" said Mr. Povey.

Then he began to come down the corridor, slowly.

"You haven't been to the dentist's," said Constance, sympathetically.

"No, I haven't," said Mr. Povey, as if Constance was indicating a fact which had escaped his attention. "The truth is, I thought it looked like rain, and if I'd got wet—you see——"

Miserable Mr. Povey!

"Yes," said Constance, "you certainly ought to keep out of draughts. Don't you think it would be a good thing if you went and sat in the parlour? There's a fire there."

"I shall be all right, thank you," said Mr. Povey. And after a pause: "Well, thanks, I will."

### III.

The girls made way for him to pass them at the head of the twisting stairs which led down to the parlour. Constance followed, and Sophia followed Constance.

"Have father's chair," said Constance.

There were two rocking-chairs with fluted backs covered by antimacassars, one on either side of the hearth. That to the left was still entitled "father's chair," though its owner had not sat in it since long before the Crimean war, and would never sit in it again.

"I think I'd sooner have the other one," said Mr. Povey, "because it's on the right side, you see." And he touched his right cheek.

Having taken Mrs. Baines's chair, he bent his face down to the fire, seeking comfort from its warmth. Sophia poked the fire, whereupon Mr. Povey abruptly withdrew his face. He then felt something light on his shoulders. Constance had taken the antimacassar from the back of the chair, and protected him with it from the draughts. He did not instantly rebel, and therefore was permanently barred from rebellion. He was entrapped by the antimacassar. It formally constituted him an invalid, and Constance and Sophia his nurses. Constance drew the curtain across the street door. No draught could come from the window, for the window was not "made to open."

The age of ventilation had not arrived. Sophia shut the other two doors. And, each near a door, the girls gazed at Mr. Povey behind his back, irresolute, but filled with a delicious sense of responsibility.

The situation was on a different plane now. The seriousness of Mr. Povey's toothache, which became more and more manifest, had already wiped out the ludicrous memory of the encounter in the showroom. Looking at these two big girls, with their short-sleeved black frocks and black aprons, and their smooth hair, and their composed serious faces, one would have judged them incapable of the least lapse from an archangelic primness; Sophia especially presented a marvellous imitation of saintly innocence. As for the toothache, its action on Mr. Povey was apparently periodic; it gathered to a crisis like a wave, gradually, the torture increasing till the wave broke and left Mr. Povey exhausted, but free for a moment from pain. These crises recurred about once a minute. And now, accustomed to the presence of the young virgins, and having tacitly acknowledged by his acceptance of the antimacassar that his state was abnormal, he gave himself up frankly to affliction. He concealed nothing of his agony, which was fully displayed by sudden contortions of his frame, and frantic oscillations of the rocking-chair. Presently, as he lay back enfeebled in the wash of a spent wave, he murmured with a sick man's voice:

"I suppose you haven't got any laudanum?"

The girls started into life. "Laudanum, Mr. Povey?"

"Yes, to hold in my mouth."

He sat up, tense; another wave was forming. The excellent fellow was lost to all self-respect, all decency.

"There's sure to be some in mother's cupboard," said Sophia.

Constance, who bore Mrs. Baines's bunch of keys at her girdle, a solemn trust, moved a little fearfully to a corner cupboard which was hung in the angle to the right of the projecting fireplace, over a shelf on which stood a large copper tea-urn. That corner cupboard, of oak inlaid with maple and ebony in a simple border pattern, was typical of the room. It was of a piece with the deep green "flock" wall paper, and the tea-urn, and the rocking-chairs with their antimacassars, and the harmonium in rosewood with a Chinese *papier-maché* tea-caddy on the top of it; even with the carpet, certainly the most curious parlour carpet that ever was, being made of lengths of the stair-carpet sewn together side by side. That corner cupboard was already old in service; it had held the medicines of generations. It gleamed darkly with the grave and genuine polish which comes from ancient use alone. The key which Constance chose from her bunch was like the cupboard, smooth and shining with years; it fitted and turned very easily, yet with a firm snap. The single wide door opened sedately as a portal.

The girls examined the sacred interior, which had the air of being inhabited by an army of diminutive prisoners, each crying aloud with the full strength of its label to be set free on a mission.

"There it is!" said Sophia eagerly.

And there it was: a blue bottle, with a saffron label. "Caution. POISON. Laudanum. Charles Critchlow, M.P.S. Dispensing Chemist. St. Luke's Square, Bursley."

Those large capitals frightened the girls. Constance took the bottle as she might have taken a loaded revolver, and she glanced at Sophia. Their omnipotent, all-wise mother was not present to tell them what to do. They, who had never decided, had to decide now. And Con-

stance was the elder. Must this fearsome stuff, whose very name was a name of fear, be introduced in spite of printed warnings into Mr. Povey's mouth? The responsibility was terrifying.

"Perhaps I'd just better ask Mr. Critchlow," Constance faltered.

The expectation of beneficent laudanum had enlivened Mr. Povey, had already, indeed, by a sort of suggestion, half cured his toothache.

"Oh no!" he said. "No need to ask Mr. Critchlow... Two or three drops in a little water." He showed impatience to be at the laudanum.

The girls knew that an antipathy existed between the chemist and Mr. Povey.

"It's sure to be all right," said Sophia. "I'll get the water."

With youthful cries and alarms they succeeded in pouring four mortal dark drops (one more than Constance intended) into a cup containing a little water. And as they handed the cup to Mr. Povey their faces were the faces of affrighted comical conspirators. They felt so old and they looked so young.

Mr. Povey imbibed eagerly of the potion, put the cup on the mantelpiece, and then tilted his head to the right so as to submerge the affected tooth. In this posture he remained, awaiting the sweet influence of the remedy. The girls, out of a nice modesty, turned away, for Mr. Povey must not swallow the medicine, and they preferred to leave him unhampered in the solution of a delicate problem. When next they examined him, he was leaning back in the rocking-chair with his mouth open and his eyes shut.

"Has it done you any good, Mr. Povey?"

"I think I'll lie down on the sofa for a minute," was Mr. Povey's strange reply; and forthwith he sprang up and flung himself onto the horse-hair sofa between the fireplace and the window, where he lay stripped of all his dignity, a mere beaten animal in a grey suit with peculiar coat-tails, and a very creased waistcoat, and a lapel that was planted with pins, and a paper collar and close-fitting paper cuffs.

Constance ran after him with the antimacassar, which she spread softly on his shoulders; and Sophia put another one over his thin little legs, all drawn up.

They then gazed at their handiwork, with secret self-accusations and the most dreadful misgivings.

"He surely never swallowed it!" Constance whispered.

"He's asleep, anyhow," said Sophia, more loudly.

Mr. Povey was certainly asleep, and his mouth was very wide open—like a shop-door. The only question was whether his sleep was not an eternal sleep; the only question was whether he was not out of his pain for ever.

Then he snored—horribly; his snore seemed a portent of disaster.

Sophia approached him as though he were a bomb, and stared, growing bolder, into his mouth.

"Oh, Con," she summoned her sister, "do come and look! It's too droll!"

In an instant all their four eyes were exploring the singular landscape of Mr. Povey's mouth. In a corner, to the right of that interior, was one sizeable fragment of a tooth, that was attached to Mr. Povey by the slenderest tie, so that at each respiration of Mr. Povey, when his body slightly heaved and the gale moaned in the cavern, this tooth moved separately, showing that its long connection with Mr. Povey was drawing to a close.

"That's the one," said Sophia, pointing. "And it's as loose as anything. Did you ever see such a funny thing?"

The extreme funniness of the thing had lulled in Sophia fear of Mr. Povey's sudden death.

"I'll see how much he's taken," said Constance, pre-occupied, going to the mantelpiece.

"Why, I do believe----" Sophia began, and then stopped, glancing at the sewing-machine, which stood next to the sofa.

It was a Howe sewing-machine. It had a little tool-drawer, and in the tool-drawer was a small pair of pliers. Constance, engaged in sniffing at the lees of the potion in order to estimate its probable deadliness, heard the well-known click of the little tool-drawer, and then she saw Sophia nearing Mr. Povey's mouth with the pliers.

"Sophia!" she exclaimed, aghast. "What in the name of goodness are you doing?"

"Nothing," said Sophia.

The next instant Mr. Povey sprang up out of his laudanum dream.

"It jumps!" he muttered; and, after a reflective pause, "but it's much better." He had at any rate escaped death.

Sophia's right hand was behind her back.

Just then a hawker passed down King Street, crying mussels and cockles.

"Oh!" Sophia almost shrieked. "Do let's have mussels and cockles for tea!" And she rushed to the door, and unlocked and opened it, regardless of the risk of draughts to Mr. Povey.

In those days people often depended upon the caprices of hawkers for the tastiness of their teas; but it was an adventurous age, when errant knights of commerce were



numerous and enterprising. You went on to your doorstep, caught your meal as it passed, withdrew, cooked it and ate it, quite in the manner of the early Briton.

Constance was obliged to join her sister on the top step. Sophia descended to the second step.

"Fresh mussels and cockles all alive oh!" bawled the hawker, looking across the road in the April breeze. He was the celebrated Hollins, a professional Irish drunkard, aged in iniquity, who cheerfully saluted magistrates in the street, and referred to the workhouse, which he occasionally visited, as the Bastille.

Sophia was trembling from head to foot.

"What *are* you laughing at, you silly thing?" Constance demanded.

Sophia surreptitiously showed the pliers, which she had partly thrust into her pocket. Between their points was a most perceptible, and even recognisable, fragment of Mr. Povey.

This was the crown of Sophia's career as a perpetrator of the unutterable.

"What!" Constance's face showed the final contortions of that horrified incredulity which is forced to believe.

Sophia nudged her violently to remind her that they were in the street, and also quite close to Mr. Povey.

"Now, my little missies," said the vile Hollins. "Three-pence a pint, and how's your honoured mother to-day? Yes, fresh, so help me God!"

## CHAPTER II.

### THE TOOTH.

#### I.

THE two girls came up the unlighted stone staircase which led from Maggie's cave to the door of the parlour.

Sophia, foremost, was carrying a large tray, and Constance a small one. Constance, who had nothing on her tray but a teapot, a bowl of steaming and balmy-scented mussels and cockles, and a plate of hot buttered toast, went directly into the parlour on the left. Sophia had in her arms the entire material and apparatus of a high tea for two, including eggs, jam, and toast (covered with the slop-basin turned upside down), but not including mussels and cockles. She turned to the right, passed along the corridor by the cutting-out room, up two steps into the sheeted and shuttered gloom of the closed shop, up the show-room stairs, through the show-room, and so into the bedroom corridor. Experience had proved it easier to make this long detour than to round the difficult corner of the parlour stairs with a large loaded tray. Sophia knocked with the edge of the tray at the door of the principal bedroom. The muffled oratorical sound from within suddenly ceased, and the door was opened by a very tall, very thin, black-bearded man, who looked down at Sophia as if to demand what she meant by such an interruption.

"I've brought the tea, Mr. Critchlow," said Sophia.

And Mr. Critchlow carefully accepted the tray.

"Is that my little Sophia?" asked a faint voice from the depths of the bedroom.

"Yes, father," said Sophia.

But she did not attempt to enter the room. Mr. Critchlow put the tray on a white-clad chest of drawers near the door, and then he shut the door, with no ceremony. Mr. Critchlow was John Baines's oldest and closest friend, though decidedly younger than the draper. He frequently "popped in" to have a word with the invalid; but Thursday afternoon was his special afternoon, consecrated by him to the

service of the sick. From two o'clock precisely till eight o'clock precisely he took charge of John Baines, reigning autocratically over the bedroom. It was known that he would not tolerate invasions, nor even ambassadorial visits. No! He gave up his weekly holiday to this business of friendship, and he must be allowed to conduct the business in his own way. Mrs. Baines herself avoided disturbing Mr. Critchlow's ministrations on her husband. She was glad to do so; for Mr. Baines was never to be left alone under any circumstances, and the convenience of being able to rely upon the presence of a staid member of the Pharmaceutical Society for six hours of a given day every week outweighed the slight affront to her prerogatives as wife and house-mistress. Mr. Critchlow was an extremely peculiar man, but when he was in the bedroom she could leave the house with an easy mind. Moreover, John Baines enjoyed these Thursday afternoons. For him, there was "none like Charles Critchlow." The two old friends experienced a sort of grim, desiccated happiness, cooped up together in the bedroom, secure from women and fools generally. How they spent the time did not seem to be certainly known, but the impression was that politics occupied them.

So Sophia, faced with the shut door of the bedroom, went down to the parlour by the shorter route. She knew that on going up again, after tea, she would find the devastated tray on the doormat.

Constance was helping Mr. Povey to mussels and cockles. And Mr. Povey still wore one of the antimacassars. It must have stuck to his shoulders when he sprang up from the sofa, woollen antimacassars being notoriously parasitic things. Sophia sat down, somewhat self-consciously. The serious Constance was also perturbed. Mr. Povey did not

usually take tea in the house on Thursday afternoons: his practice was to go out into the great, mysterious world. Never before had he shared a meal with the girls alone. The situation was indubitably unexpected, unforeseen; it was, too, piquant, and what added to its piquancy was the fact that Constance and Sophia were, somehow, responsible for Mr. Povey. They felt that they were responsible for him. They had offered the practical sympathy of two intelligent and well-trained young women, born nurses by reason of their sex, and Mr. Povey had accepted; he was now on their hands. Sophia's monstrous, sly operation in Mr. Povey's mouth did not cause either of them much alarm, Constance having apparently recovered from the first shock of it. They had discussed it in the kitchen while preparing the teas; Constance's extraordinarily severe and dictatorial tone in condemning it had led to a certain heat. But the success of the impudent wrench justified it despite any irrefutable argument to the contrary. Mr. Povey was better already, and he evidently remained in ignorance of his loss.

"Have some?" Constance asked of Sophia, with a large spoon hovering over the bowl of shells.

"Yes, *please*," said Sophia, positively.

Constance well knew that she would have some, and had only asked from sheer nervousness.

"Pass your plate, then."

Now when everybody was served with mussels, cockles, tea, and toast, and Mr. Povey had been persuaded to cut the crust off his toast, and Constance had, quite unnecessarily, warned Sophia against the deadly green stuff in the mussels, and Constance had further pointed out that the evenings were getting longer, and Mr. Povey had agreed that they were, there remained nothing to say.

An irksome silence fell on them all, and no one could lift it off. Tiny clashes of shell and crockery sounded with the terrible clearness of noises heard in the night. Each person avoided the eyes of the others. And both Constance and Sophia kept straightening their bodies at intervals, and expanding their chests, and then looking at their plates; occasionally a prim cough was discharged. It was a sad example of the difference between young women's dreams of social brilliance and the reality of life. These girls got more and more girlish, until, from being women at the administering of laudanum, they sank back to about eight years of age—perfect children—at the tea-table.

The tension was snapped by Mr. Povey. "My God!" he muttered, moved by a startling discovery to this impious and disgraceful oath (he, the pattern and exemplar—and in the presence of innocent girlhood too!). "I've swallowed it!"

"Swallowed what, Mr. Povey?" Constance inquired.

The tip of Mr. Povey's tongue made a careful voyage of inspection all round the right side of his mouth.

"Oh yes!" he said, as if solemnly accepting the inevitable. "I've swallowed it!"

Sophia's face was now scarlet; she seemed to be looking for some place to hide it. Constance could not think of anything to say.

"That tooth has been loose for two years," said Mr. Povey, "and now I've swallowed it with a mussel."

"Oh, Mr. Povey!" Constance cried in confusion, and added, "There's one good thing, it can't hurt you any more now."

"Oh!" said Mr. Povey. "It wasn't *that* tooth that was hurting me. It's an old stump at the back that's

upset me so this last day or two. I wish it had been."

Sophia had her teacup close to her red face. At these words of Mr. Povey her cheeks seemed to fill out like plump apples. She dashed the cup into its saucer, spilling tea recklessly, and then ran from the room with stifled snorts.

"Sophia!" Constance protested.

"I must just——" Sophia incoherently spluttered in the doorway. "I shall be all right. Don't——"

Constance, who had risen, sat down again.

## II.

Sophia fled along the passage leading to the shop and took refuge in the cutting-out room, a room which the astonishing architect had devised upon what must have been a backyard of one of the three constituent houses. It was lighted from its roof, and only a wooden partition, eight feet high, separated it from the passage. Here Sophia gave rein to her feelings; she laughed and cried together, weeping generously into her handkerchief and wildly giggling, in a hysteria which she could not control. The spectacle of Mr. Povey mourning for a tooth which he thought he had swallowed, but which in fact lay all the time in her pocket, seemed to her to be by far the most ridiculous, side-splitting thing that had ever happened or could happen on earth. It utterly overcame her. And when she fancied that she had exhausted and conquered its surpassing ridiculousness, this ridiculousness seized her again and rolled her anew in depths of mad, trembling laughter.

Gradually she grew calmer. She heard the parlour door open, and Constance descend the kitchen steps with a rattling tray of tea-things. Tea, then, was finished,

without her! Constance did not remain in the kitchen, because the cups and saucers were left for Maggie to wash up as a fitting *coda* to Maggie's monthly holiday. The parlour door closed. And the vision of Mr. Povey in his antimacassar swept Sophia off into another convulsion of laughter and tears. Upon this the parlour door opened again, and Sophia choked herself into silence while Constance hastened along the passage. In a minute Constance returned with her woolwork, which she had got from the show-room, and the parlour received her. Not the least curiosity on the part of Constance as to what had become of Sophia!

At length Sophia, a faint meditative smile being all that was left of the storm in her, ascended slowly to the show-room, through the shop. Nothing there of interest! Thence she wandered towards the drawing-room, and encountered Mr. Critchlow's tray on the mat. She picked it up and carried it by way of the show-room and shop down to the kitchen, where she dreamily munched two pieces of toast that had cooled to the consistency of leather. She mounted the stone steps and listened at the door of the parlour. No sound! This seclusion of Mr. Povey and Constance was really very strange. She roved right round the house, and descended creepingly by the twisted house-stairs, and listened intently at the other door of the parlour. She now detected a faint regular snore. Mr. Povey, a prey to laudanum and mussels, was sleeping while Constance worked at her fire-screen! It was now in the highest degree odd, this seclusion of Mr. Povey and Constance; unlike anything in Sophia's experience! She wanted to go into the parlour, but she could not bring herself to do so. She crept away again, forlorn and puzzled, and next discovered herself in the bedroom which

she shared with Constance at the top of the house; she lay down in the dusk on the bed and began to read "The Days of Bruce;" but she read only with her eyes.

Later, she heard movements on the house-stairs, and the familiar whining creak of the door at the foot thereof. She skipped lightly to the door of the bedroom.

"Good night, Mr. Povey. I hope you'll be able to sleep."

Constance's voice!

"It will probably come on again."

Mr. Povey's voice, pessimistic!

Then the shutting of doors. It was almost dark. She went back to the bed, expecting a visit from Constance. But a clock struck eight, and all the various phenomena connected with the departure of Mr. Critchlow occurred one after another. At the same time Maggie came home from the land of romance. Then long silences! Constance was now immured with her father, it being her "turn" to nurse; Maggie was washing up in her cave, and Mr. Povey was lost to sight in his bedroom. Then Sophia heard her mother's lively, commanding knock on the King Street door. Dusk had definitely yielded to black night in the bedroom. Sophia dozed and dreamed. When she awoke, her ear caught the sound of knocking. She jumped up, tiptoed to the landing, and looked over the balustrade, whence she had a view of all the first-floor corridor. The gas had been lighted; through the round aperture at the top of the porcelain globe she could see the wavering flame. It was her mother, still bonneted, who was knocking at the door of Mr. Povey's room. Constance stood in the doorway of her parents' room. Mrs. Baines knocked twice with an interval, and then said to Constance, in a resonant whisper that vibrated up the corridor—



"He seems to be fast asleep. I'd better not disturb him."

"But suppose he wants something in the night?"

"Well, child, I should hear him moving. Sleep's the best thing for him."

Mrs. Baines left Mr. Povey to the effects of laudanum, and came along the corridor. She was a stout woman, all black stuff and gold chain, and her skirt more than filled the width of the corridor. Sophia watched her habitual heavy mounting gesture as she climbed the two steps that gave variety to the corridor. At the gas-jet she paused, and, putting her hand to the tap, gazed up into the globe.

"Where's Sophia?" she demanded, her eyes fixed on the gas as she lowered the flame.

"I think she must be in bed, mother," said Constance, nonchalantly.

The returned mistress was point by point resuming knowledge and control of that complicated machine—her household.

### III.

When Constance came to bed, half an hour later, Sophia was already in bed. The room was fairly spacious. It had been the girls' retreat and fortress since their earliest years.

They possessed only one bed, one washstand, and one dressing-table; but in some other respects they were rather fortunate girls, for they had two mahogany wardrobes; this mutual independence as regards wardrobes was due partly to Mrs. Baines's strong commonsense, and partly to their father's tendency to spoil them a little. They had, moreover, a chest of drawers with a curved front, of which

structure Constance occupied two short drawers and one long one, and Sophia two long drawers. On it stood two fancy work-boxes, in which each sister kept jewellery, a savings-bank book, and other treasures, and these boxes were absolutely sacred to their respective owners. They were different, but one was not more magnificent than the other. Indeed, a rigid equality was the rule in the chamber, the single exception being that behind the door were three hooks, of which Constance commanded two.

"Well," Sophia began, when Constance appeared. "How's darling Mr. Povey?" She was lying on her back, and smiling at her two hands, which she held up in front of her.

"Asleep," said Constance. "At least mother thinks so. She says sleep is the best thing for him."

"It will probably come on again," said Sophia.

"What's that you say?" Constance asked, undressing.

"It will probably come on again."

These words were a quotation from the utterances of darling Mr. Povey on the stairs, and Sophia delivered them with an exact imitation of Mr. Povey's vocal mannerism.

"Sophia," said Constance, firmly, approaching the bed, "I wish you wouldn't be so silly!" She had benevolently ignored the satirical note in Sophia's first remark, but a strong instinct in her rose up and objected to further derision. "Surely you've done enough for one day!" she added.

For answer Sophia exploded into violent laughter, which she made no attempt to control. She laughed too long and too freely while Constance stared at her.

"I don't know what's come over you!" said Constance.

"It's only because I can't look at it without simply

going off into fits!" Sophia gasped out. And she held up a tiny object in her left hand.

Constance started, flushing. "You don't mean to say you've kept it!" she protested earnestly. "How horrid you are, Sophia! Give it me at once and let me throw it away. I never heard of such doings. Now give it me!"

"No," Sophia objected, still laughing. "I wouldn't part with it for worlds. It's too lovely."

She had laughed away all her secret resentment against Constance for having ignored her during the whole evening and for being on such intimate terms with their parents. And she was ready to be candidly jolly with Constance.

"Give it me," said Constance, doggedly.

Sophia hid her hand under the clothes. "You can have his old stump, when it comes out, if you like. But not this. What a pity it's the wrong one!"

"Sophia, I'm ashamed of you! Give it me."

Then it was that Sophia first perceived Constance's extreme seriousness. She was surprised and a little intimidated by it. For the expression of Constance's face, usually so benign and calm, was harsh, almost fierce. However, Sophia had a great deal of what is called "spirit," and not even ferocity on the face of mild Constance could intimidate her for more than a few seconds. Her gaiety expired and her teeth were hidden.

"I've said nothing to mother——" Constance proceeded.

"I should hope you haven't," Sophia put in tersely.

"But I certainly shall if you don't throw that away," Constance finished.

"You can say what you like," Sophia retorted, adding contemptuously a term of opprobrium which has long since passed out of use: "Cant!"

"Will you give it me or won't you?"

"No!"

It was a battle suddenly engaged in the bedroom. The atmosphere had altered completely with the swiftness of magic. The beauty of Sophia, the angelic tenderness of Constance, and the youthful, naïve, innocent charm of both of them, were transformed into something sinister and cruel. Sophia lay back on the pillow amid her dark-brown hair, and gazed with relentless defiance into the angry eyes of Constance, who stood threatening by the bed. They could hear the gas singing over the dressing-table, and their hearts beating the blood wildly in their veins. They ceased to be young without growing old; the eternal had leapt up in them from its sleep.

Constance walked away from the bed to the dressing-table and began to loose her hair and brush it, holding back her head, shaking it, and bending forward, in the changeless gesture of that rite. She was so disturbed that she had unconsciously reversed the customary order of the *toilette*. After a moment Sophia slipped out of bed and, stepping with her bare feet to the chest of drawers, opened her work-box and deposited the fragment of Mr. Povey therein; she dropped the lid with an uncompromising bang, as if to say, "We shall see if I am to be trod upon, miss!" Their eyes met again in the looking-glass. Then Sophia got back into bed.

Five minutes later, when her hair was quite finished, Constance knelt down and said her prayers. Having said her prayers, she went straight to Sophia's work-box, opened it, seized the fragment of Mr. Povey, ran to the window, and frantically pushed the fragment through the slit into the Square.

"There!" she exclaimed nervously.

She had accomplished this inconceivable transgression of the code of honour, beyond all undoing, before Sophia could recover from the stupefaction of seeing her sacred work-box impudently violated.

Constance, trembling, took pains to finish undressing with dignified deliberation. Sophia's behaviour under the blow seemed too good to be true; but it gave her courage. At length she turned out the gas and lay down by Sophia. And there was a little shuffling, and then stillness for awhile.

"And if you want to know," said Constance in a tone that mingled amicableness with righteousness, "mother's decided with Aunt Harriet that we are *both* to leave school next term."

### CHAPTER III.

#### A BATTLE.

##### I.

ON the morning after Sophia's first essay in dentistry Mrs. Baines was making her pastry in the underground kitchen. This kitchen, Maggie's cavern-home, had the mystery of a church, and on dark days it had the mystery of a crypt. The stone steps leading down to it from the level of earth were quite unlighted. You felt for them with the feet of faith, and when you arrived in the kitchen, the kitchen, by contrast, seemed luminous and gay; the architect may have considered and intended this effect of the staircase. The kitchen saw day through a wide, shallow window whose top touched the ceiling and whose bottom had been out of the girls' reach until long after they had begun to go to school. Its panes were small, and about half of them were of the "knot" kind, through

which no object could be distinguished; the other half were of a later date, and stood for the march of civilisation. The view from the window consisted of the vast plate-glass windows of the newly built Sun vaults, and of passing legs and skirts. A strong wire grating prevented any excess of illumination, and also protected the glass from the caprices of wayfarers in King Street. Boys had a habit of stopping to kick with their full strength at the grating.

Forget-me-nots on a brown field ornamented the walls of the kitchen. Its ceiling was irregular and grimy, and a beam ran across it; in this beam were two hooks; from these hooks had once depended the ropes of a swing, much used by Constance and Sophia in the old days before they were grown up. A large range stood out from the wall between the stairs and the window. The rest of the furniture comprised a table—against the wall opposite the range—a cupboard, and two Windsor chairs. Opposite the foot of the steps was a doorway, without a door, leading to two larders, dimmer even than the kitchen, vague retreats made visible by whitewash, where bowls of milk, dishes of cold bones, and remainders of fruit-pies, reposed on stillages; in the corner nearest the kitchen was a great steen in which the bread was kept. Another doorway on the other side of the kitchen led to the first coal-cellar, where was also the slopstone and tap, and thence a tunnel took you to the second coal-cellar, where coke and ashes were stored; the tunnel proceeded to a distant, infinitesimal yard, and from the yard, by ways behind Mr. Critchlow's shop, you could finally emerge, astonished, upon Brougham Street. The sense of the vast-obscure of those regions which began at the top of the kitchen steps and ended in black corners of larders

or abruptly in the common dailiness of Brougham Street, a sense which Constance and Sophia had acquired in infancy, remained with them almost unimpaired as they grew old.

Mrs. Baines wore black alpaca, shielded by a white apron whose string drew attention to the amplitude of her waist. Her sleeves were turned up, and her hands, as far as the knuckles, covered with damp flour. Her ageless smooth paste-board occupied a corner of the table, and near it were her paste-roller, butter, some pie-dishes, shredded apples, sugar, and other things. Those rosy hands were at work among a sticky substance in a large white bowl.

"Mother, are you there?" she heard a voice from above.

"Yes, my chuck."

Footsteps apparently reluctant and hesitating clinked on the stairs, and Sophia entered the kitchen.

"Put this curl straight," said Mrs. Baines, lowering her head slightly and holding up her floured hands, which might not touch anything but flour. "Thank you. It bothered me. And now stand out of my light. I'm in a hurry. I must get into the shop so that I can send Mr. Povey off to the dentist's. What is Constance doing?"

"Helping Maggie to make Mr. Povey's bed."

"Oh!"

Though fat, Mrs. Baines was a comely woman, with fine brown hair, and confidently calm eyes that indicated her belief in her own capacity to accomplish whatever she could be called on to accomplish. She looked neither more nor less than her age, which was forty-five. She was not a native of the district, having been culled by her husband from the moorland town of Axe, twelve miles

off. Like nearly all women who settle in a strange land upon marriage, at the bottom of her heart she had considered herself just a trifle superior to the strange land and its ways. This feeling, confirmed by long experience, had never left her.

"Now you little vixen!" she exclaimed. Sophia was stealing and eating slices of half-cooked apple. "This comes of having no breakfast! And why didn't you come down to supper last night?"

"I don't know. I forgot."

Mrs. Baines scrutinised the child's eyes, which met hers with a sort of diffident boldness. She knew everything that a mother can know of a daughter, and she was sure that Sophia had no cause to be indisposed. Therefore she scrutinised those eyes with a faint apprehension.

"If you can't find anything better to do," said she, "butter me the inside of this dish. Are your hands clean? No, better not touch it."

Mrs. Baines was now at the stage of depositing little pats of butter in rows on a large plain of paste. The best fresh butter! Cooking butter, to say naught of lard, was unknown in that kitchen on Friday mornings. She doubled the expanse of paste on itself and rolled the butter in—supreme operation!

"Constance has told you about leaving school?" said Mrs. Baines, in the vein of small-talk, as she trimmed the paste to the shape of a pie-dish.

"Yes," Sophia replied shortly. Then she moved away from the table to the range. There was a toasting-fork on the rack, and she began to play with it.

"Well, are you glad? Your aunt Harriet thinks you are quite old enough to leave. And as we'd decided in



any case that Constance was to leave, it's really much simpler that you should both leave together."

"Mother," said Sophia, rattling the toasting-fork, "what am I going to do after I've left school?"

"I hope," Mrs. Baines answered with that sententiousness which even the cleverest of parents are not always clever enough to deny themselves, "I hope that both of you will do what you can to help your mother—and father," she added.

"Yes," said Sophia, irritated. "But what am I going to *do*?"

"That must be considered. As Constance is to learn the millinery, I've been thinking that you might begin to make yourself useful in the underwear, gloves, silks, and so on. Then between you, you would one day be able to manage quite nicely all that side of the shop, and I should be—"

"I don't want to go into the shop, mother."

This interruption was made in a voice apparently cold and inimical. But Sophia trembled with nervous excitement as she uttered the words. Mrs. Baines gave a brief glance at her, unobserved by the child, whose face was towards the fire. She deemed herself a finished expert in the reading of Sophia's moods; nevertheless, as she looked at that straight back and proud head, she had no suspicion that the whole essence and being of Sophia was silently but intensely imploring sympathy.

"I wish you would be quiet with that fork," said Mrs. Baines, with the curious, grim politeness which often characterised her relations with her daughters.

The toasting-fork fell on the brick floor, after having rebounded from the ash-tin. Sophia hurriedly replaced it on the rack.

"Then what *shall* you do?" Mrs. Baines proceeded, conquering the annoyance caused by the toasting-fork. "I think it's me that should ask you instead of you asking me. What shall you do? Your father and I were both hoping you would take kindly to the shop and try to repay us for all the—"

Mrs. Baines was unfortunate in her phrasing that morning. She happened to be, in truth, rather an exceptional parent, but that morning she seemed unable to avoid the absurd pretensions which parents of those days assumed quite sincerely and which every good child with meekness accepted.

Sophia was not a good child, and she obstinately denied in her heart the cardinal principle of family life, namely, that the parent has conferred on the offspring a supreme favour by bringing it into the world. She interrupted her mother again, rudely.

"I don't want to leave school at all," she said passionately.

"But you will have to leave school sooner or later," argued Mrs. Baines, with an air of quiet reasoning, of putting herself on a level with Sophia. "You can't stay at school for ever, my pet, can you? Out of my way!"

She hurried across the kitchen with a pie, which she whipped into the oven, shutting the iron door with a careful gesture.

"Yes," said Sophia. "I should like to be a teacher. That's what I want to be."

The tap in the coal-cellar, out of repair, could be heard distinctly and systematically dropping water into a jar on the slopstone.

"A school-teacher?" inquired Mrs. Baines.

"Of course. What other kind is there?" said Sophia, sharply. "With Miss Chetwynd."

"I don't think your father would like that," Mrs. Baines replied. "I'm sure he wouldn't like it."

"Why not?"

"It wouldn't be quite suitable."

"Why not, mother?" the girl demanded with a sort of ferocity. She had now quitted the range. A man's feet twinkled past the window.

"It would take you too much away from home," said Mrs. Baines, achieving a second pie.

She spoke softly. The experience of being Sophia's mother for nearly sixteen years had not been lost on Mrs. Baines, and though she was now discovering undreamt-of dangers in Sophia's erratic temperament, she kept her presence of mind sufficiently well to behave with diplomatic smoothness. It was undoubtedly humiliating to a mother to be forced to use diplomacy in dealing with a girl in short sleeves. In *her* day mothers had been autocrats. But Sophia was Sophia.

"What if it did?" Sophia curtly demanded.

"And there's no opening in Bursley," said Mrs. Baines.

"Miss Chetwynd would have me, and then after a time I could go to her sister."

"Her sister? What sister?"

"Her sister that has a big school in London somewhere."

Mrs. Baines covered her unprecedented emotions by gazing into the oven at the first pie. The pie was doing well, under all the circumstances. In those few seconds she reflected rapidly and decided that to a desperate disease a desperate remedy must be applied.

London! She herself had never been farther than

Manchester. London, "after a time!" No, diplomacy would be misplaced in this crisis of Sophia's development!

"Sophia," she said, in a changed and solemn voice, fronting her daughter, and holding away from her apron those floured, ringed hands, "I don't know what has come over you. Truly I don't! Your father and I are prepared to put up with a certain amount, but the line must be drawn. The fact is, we've spoilt you, and instead of getting better as you grow up, you're getting worse. Now let me hear no more of this, please. I wish you would imitate your sister a little more. Of course if you won't do your share in the shop, no one can make you. If you choose to be an idler about the house, we shall have to endure it. We can only advise you for your own good. But as for this . . ." She stopped, and let silence speak, and then finished: "Let me hear no more of it."

## II.

"Now, really, Mr. Povey, this is not like you," said Mrs. Baines, who, on her way into the shop, had discovered the Indispensable in the cutting-out room.

It is true that the cutting-out room was almost Mr. Povey's sanctum, whither he retired from time to time to cut out suits of clothes and odd garments for the tailoring department. It is true that the tailoring department flourished with orders, employing several tailors who crossed legs in their own homes, and that appointments were continually being made with customers for trying-on in that room. But these considerations did not affect Mrs. Baines's attitude of disapproval.

"I'm just cutting out that suit for the minister," said Mr. Povey.

The Reverend Mr. Murley, superintendent of the

Wesleyan Methodist circuit, called on Mr. Baines every week. On a recent visit Mr. Baines had remarked that the parson's coat was ageing into green, and had commanded that a new suit should be built and presented to Mr. Murley. Mr. Murley, who had a genuine mediæval passion for souls, and who spent his money and health freely in gratifying the passion, had accepted the offer strictly on behalf of Christ, and had carefully explained to Mr. Povey Christ's use for multifarious pockets.

"I see you are," said Mrs. Baines tartly. "But that's no reason why you should be without a coat—and in this cold room too. You with toothache!"

The fact was that Mr. Povey always doffed his coat when cutting out. Instead of a coat he wore a tape-measure.

"My tooth doesn't hurt me," said he, sheepishly, dropping the great scissors and picking up a cake of chalk.

"Fiddlesticks!" said Mrs. Baines.

This exclamation shocked Mr. Povey.

"You men are all alike," Mrs. Baines continued. "The very thought of the dentist's cures you. Why don't you go in at once to Mr. Critchlow and have it out—like a man?"

Mr. Critchlow extracted teeth, and his shop sign said "Bone-setter and chemist." But Mr. Povey had his views.

"I make no account of Mr. Critchlow as a dentist," said he.

"Then for goodness' sake go up to Oulsnam's."

"When? I can't very well go now, and to-morrow is Saturday."

"Why can't you go now?"

"Well, of course, I *could* go now," he admitted.

"Let me advise you to go, then, and don't come back

with that tooth in your head. I shall be having you laid up next. Show some pluck, do!"

"Oh! pluck—!" he protested, hurt.

At that moment Constance came down the passage singing.

"Constance, my pet!" Mrs. Baines called.

"Yes, mother." She put her head into the room.

"Oh!" Mr. Povey was assuming his coat.

"Mr. Povey is going to the dentist's."

"Yes. I'm going at once," Mr. Povey confirmed.

"Oh! I'm so *glad!*" Constance exclaimed. Her face expressed a pure sympathy, uncomplicated by critical sentiments. Mr. Povey rapidly bathed in that sympathy, and then decided that he must show himself a man of oak and iron.

"It's always best to get these things done with," said he, with stern detachment. "I'll just slip my overcoat on."

"Here it is," said Constance, quickly. Mr. Povey's overcoat and hat were hung on a hook immediately outside the room, in the passage. She gave him the overcoat, anxious to be of service.

"I didn't call you in here to be Mr. Povey's valet," said Mrs. Baines to herself with mild grimness; and aloud: "I can't stay in the shop long, Constance, but you can be there, can't you, till Mr. Povey comes back? And if anything happens run upstairs and tell me."

"Yes, mother," Constance eagerly consented. She hesitated and then turned to obey at once.

"I want to speak to you first, my pet," Mrs. Baines stopped her. And her tone was peculiar, charged with import, confidential, and therefore very flattering to Constance.

"I think I'll go out by the side-door," said Mr. Povey. "It'll be nearer."

This was truth. He would save about ten yards, in two miles, by going out through the side-door instead of through the shop. Who could have guessed that he was ashamed to be seen going to the dentist's, afraid lest, if he went through the shop, Mrs. Baines might follow him and utter some remark prejudicial to his dignity before the assistants? (Mrs. Baines could have guessed, and did.)

"You won't want that tape-measure," said Mrs. Baines, dryly, as Mr. Povey dragged open the side-door. The ends of the forgotten tape-measure were dangling beneath coat and overcoat.

"Oh!" Mr. Povey scowled at his forgetfulness.

"I'll put it in its place," said Constance, offering to receive the tape-measure.

"Thank you," said Mr. Povey, gravely. "I don't suppose they'll be long over my bit of a job," he added, with a difficult, miserable smile.

Then he went off down King Street, with an exterior of gay briskness and dignified joy in the fine May morning. But there was no May morning in his cowardly human heart.

"Hi! Povey!" cried a voice from the Square.

But Mr. Povey disregarded all appeals. He had put his hand to the plough and he would not look back.

"Hi! Povey!"

Useless!

Mrs. Baines and Constance were both at the door. A middle-aged man was crossing the road from Boulton Terrace, the lofty erection of new shops which the envious rest of the Square had decided to call "showy." He waved a hand to Mrs. Baines, who kept the door open.

"It's Dr. Harrop," she said to Constance. "I shouldn't be surprised if that baby's come at last, and he wanted to tell Mr. Povey."

Constance blushed, full of pride. Mrs. Povey, wife of "our Mr. Povey's" renowned cousin, the high-class confectioner and baker in Boulton Terrace, was a frequent subject of discussion in the Baines family, but this was absolutely the first time that Mrs. Baines had acknowledged, in presence of Constance, the marked and growing change which had characterised Mrs. Povey's condition during recent months. Such frankness on the part of her mother, coming after the decision about leaving school, proved indeed that Constance had ceased to be a mere girl.

"Good morning, doctor."

The doctor, who carried a little bag and wore riding-breeches (he was the last doctor in Bursley to abandon the saddle for the dog-cart), saluted and straightened his high, black stock.

"Morning! Morning, missy! Well, it's a boy."

"What? Yonder?" asked Mrs. Baines, indicating the confectioner's.

Dr. Harrop nodded. "I wanted to inform him," said he, jerking his shoulder in the direction of the swaggering coward.

"What did I tell you, Constance?" said Mrs. Baines, turning to her daughter.

Constance's confusion was equal to her pleasure. The alert doctor had halted at the foot of the two steps, and with one hand in the pocket of his "full-fall" breeches, he gazed up, smiling out of little eyes, at the ample matron and the slender virgin.

"Yes," he said. "Been up most of th' night. Difficult! Difficult!"



"It's all *right*, I hope?"

"Oh yes. Fine child! Fine child! But he put his mother to some trouble, for all that. Nothing fresh?" This time he lifted his eyes to indicate Mr. Baines's bedroom.

"No," said Mrs. Baines, with a different expression.

"Keeps cheerful?"

"Yes."

"Good! A very good morning to you."

He strode off towards his house, which was lower down the street.

"I hope she'll turn over a new leaf now," observed Mrs. Baines to Constance as she closed the door. Constance knew that her mother was referring to the confectioner's wife; she gathered that the hope was slight in the extreme.

"What did you want to speak to me about, mother?" she asked, as a way out of her delicious confusion.

"Shut that door," Mrs. Baines replied, pointing to the door which led to the passage; and while Constance obeyed, Mrs. Baines herself shut the staircase-door. She then said, in a low, guarded voice—

"What's all this about Sophia wanting to be a school-teacher?"

"Wanting to be a school-teacher?" Constance repeated, in tones of amazement.

"Yes. Hasn't she said anything to you?"

"Not a word!"

"Well, I never! She wants to keep on with Miss Chetwynd and be a teacher." Mrs. Baines had half a mind to add that Sophia had mentioned London. But she restrained herself. There are some things which one

cannot bring oneself to say. She added, "Instead of going into the shop!"

"I never heard of such a thing!" Constance murmured brokenly, in the excess of her astonishment. She was rolling up Mr. Povey's tape-measure.

"Neither did I!" said Mrs. Baines.

"And shall you let her, mother?"

"Neither your father nor I would ever dream of it!"

### III.

That afternoon there was a search for Sophia, whom no one had seen since dinner. She was discovered by her mother, sitting alone and unoccupied in the drawing-room. The circumstance was in itself sufficiently peculiar, for on weekdays the drawing-room was never used, even by the girls during their holidays, except for the purpose of playing the piano. However, Mrs. Baines offered no comment on Sophia's geographical situation, nor on her idleness.

"My dear," she said, standing at the door, with a self-conscious effort to behave as though nothing had happened, "will you come and sit with your father a bit?"

"Yes, mother," answered Sophia, with a sort of cold alacrity.

"Sophia is coming, father," said Mrs. Baines at the open door of the bedroom, which was at right-angles with, and close to, the drawing-room door. Then she surged swishing along the corridor and went into the show-room, whither she had been called.

Sophia passed to the bedroom, the eternal prison of John Baines. Although, on account of his nervous restlessness, Mr. Baines was never left alone, it was not a part of the usual duty of the girls to sit with him. The

person who undertook the main portion of the vigils was a certain Aunt Maria—whom the girls knew to be not a real aunt, not a powerful, effective aunt like Aunt Harriet of Axe—but a poor second cousin of John Baines; one of those necessitous, pitiful relatives who so often make life difficult for a great family in a small town. The existence of Aunt Maria, after being rather a “trial” to the Baineses, had for twelve years past developed into something absolutely “providential” for them. (It is to be remembered that in those days Providence was still busying himself with everybody’s affairs, and foreseeing the future in the most extraordinary manner. Thus, having foreseen that John Baines would have a “stroke” and need a faithful, tireless nurse, he had begun fifty years in advance by creating Aunt Maria, and had kept her carefully in misfortune’s way, so that at the proper moment she would be ready to cope with the stroke. Such at least is the only theory which will explain the use by the Baineses, and indeed by all thinking Bursley, of the word “providential” in connection with Aunt Maria.) She was a shrivelled little woman, capable of sitting twelve hours a day in a bedroom and thriving on the *régime*. At nights she went home to her little cottage in Brougham Street; she had her Thursday afternoons and generally her Sundays, and during the school vacations she was supposed to come only when she felt inclined, or when the cleaning of her cottage permitted her to come. Hence, in holiday seasons, Mr. Baines weighed more heavily on his household than at other times, and his nurses relieved each other according to the contingencies of the moment rather than by a set programme of hours.

The tragedy in ten thousand acts of which that bedroom was the scene, almost entirely escaped Sophia’s

perception, as it did Constance's. Sophia went into the bedroom as though it were a mere bedroom, with its majestic mahogany furniture, its crimson rep curtains (edged with gold), and its white, heavily tasselled counterpane. She was aged four when John Baines had suddenly been seized with giddiness on the steps of his shop, and had fallen, and, without losing consciousness, had been transformed from John Baines into a curious and pathetic survival of John Baines. She had no notion of the thrill which ran through the town on that night when it was known that John Baines had had a stroke, and that his left arm and left leg and his right eyelid were paralysed, and that the active member of the Local Board, the orator, the religious worker, the very life of the town's life, was permanently done for. She had never heard of the crisis through which her mother, assisted by Aunt Harriet, had passed, and out of which she had triumphantly emerged. She was not yet old enough even to suspect it. She possessed only the vaguest memory of her father before he had finished with the world. She knew him simply as an organism on a bed, whose left side was wasted, whose eyes were often inflamed, whose mouth was crooked, who had no creases from the nose to the corners of the mouth like other people, who experienced difficulty in eating because the food would somehow get between his gums and his cheek, who slept a great deal but was excessively fidgety while awake, who seemed to hear what was said to him a long time after it was uttered, as if the sense had to travel miles by labyrinthine passages to his brain, and who talked very, very slowly in a weak, trembling voice.

And she had an image of that remote brain as something with a red spot on it, for once Constance had said:

"Mother, why did father have a stroke?" and Mrs. Baines had replied: "It was a hæmorrhage of the brain, my dear, here"—putting a thimble finger on a particular part of Sophia's head.

Not merely had Constance and Sophia never really felt their father's tragedy; Mrs. Baines herself had largely lost the sense of it—such is the effect of use. Even the ruined organism only remembered fitfully and partially that it had once been John Baines. And if Mrs. Baines had not, by the habit of years, gradually built up a gigantic fiction that the organism remained ever the supreme consultative head of the family; if Mr. Critchlow had not obstinately continued to treat it as a crony, the mass of living and dead nerves on the rich Victorian bedstead would have been of no more account than some Aunt Maria in similar case. These two persons, his wife and his friend, just managed to keep him morally alive by indefatigably feeding his importance and his dignity. The feat was a miracle of stubborn self-deceiving, splendidly blind devotion, and incorrigible pride.

When Sophia entered the room, the paralytic followed her with his nervous gaze until she had sat down on the end of the sofa at the foot of the bed. He seemed to study her for a long time, and then he murmured in his slow, enfeebled, irregular voice:

"Is that Sophia?"

"Yes, father," she answered cheerfully.

And after another pause, the old man said: "Aye! It's Sophia."

And later: "Your mother said she should send ye."

Sophia saw that this was one of his bad, dull days. He had, occasionally, days of comparative nimbleness,

when his wits seized almost easily the meanings of external phenomena.

Presently his sallow face and long white beard began to slip down the steep slant of the pillows, and a troubled look came into his left eye. Sophia rose and, putting her hands under his armpits, lifted him higher in the bed. He was not heavy, but only a strong girl of her years could have done it.

"Aye!" he muttered. "That's it. That's it."

And, with his controllable right hand, he took her hand as she stood by the bed. She was so young and fresh, such an incarnation of the spirit of health, and he was so far gone in decay and corruption, that there seemed in this contact of body with body something unnatural and repulsive. But Sophia did not so feel it.

"Sophia," he addressed her, and made preparatory noises in his throat while she waited.

He continued after an interval, now clutching her arm, "Your mother's been telling me you don't want to go in the shop."

She turned her eyes on him, and his anxious, dim gaze met hers. She nodded.

"Nay, Sophia," he mumbled, with the extreme of slowness. "I'm surprised at ye . . . Trade's bad, bad! Ye know trade's bad?" He was still clutching her arm.

She nodded. She was, in fact, aware of the badness of trade, caused by a vague war in the United States. The words "North" and "South" had a habit of recurring in the conversation of adult persons. That was all she knew, though people were starving in the Five Towns as they were starving in Manchester.

"There's your mother," his thought struggled on, like an aged horse over a hilly road. "There's your mother!"

he repeated, as if wishful to direct Sophia's attention to the spectacle of her mother. "Working hard! Con—Constance and you must help her . . . Trade's bad. What can I do . . . lying here?"

The heat from his dry fingers was warming her arm. She wanted to move, but she could not have withdrawn her arm without appearing impatient. For a similar reason she would not avert her glance. A deepening flush increased the lustre of her immature loveliness as she bent over him. But though it was so close he did not feel that radiance. He had long outlived a susceptibility to the strange influences of youth and beauty.

"Teaching!" he muttered. "Nay, nay! I canna' allow that."

Then his white beard rose at the tip as he looked up at the ceiling above his head, reflectively.

"You understand me?" he questioned finally.

She nodded again; he loosed her arm, and she turned away. She could not have spoken. Glittering tears enriched her eyes. She was saddened into a profound and sudden grief by the ridiculousness of the scene. She had youth, physical perfection; she brimmed with energy, with the sense of vital power; all existence lay before her; when she put her lips together she felt capable of out-rying no matter whom in fortitude of resolution. She had always hated the shop. She did not understand how her mother and Constance could bring themselves to be deferential and flattering to every customer that entered. No, she did not understand it; but her mother (though a proud woman) and Constance seemed to practise such behaviour so naturally, so unquestioningly, that she had never imparted to either of them her feelings; she guessed that she would not be comprehended. But long ago she

had decided that she would never "go into the shop." She knew that she would be expected to do something, and she had fixed on teaching as the one possibility. These decisions had formed part of her inner life for years past. She had not mentioned them, being secretive and scarcely anxious for unpleasantness. But she had been slowly preparing herself to mention them. The extraordinary announcement that she was to leave school at the same time as Constance had taken her unawares, before the preparations ripening in her mind were complete—before, as it were, she had girded up her loins for the fray. She had been caught unready, and the opposing forces had obtained the advantage of her. But did they suppose she was beaten?

No argument from her mother! No hearing, even! Just a curt and haughty "Let me hear no more of this!" And so the great desire of her life, nourished year after year in her inmost bosom, was to be flouted and sacrificed with a word! Her mother did not appear ridiculous in the affair, for her mother was a genuine power, commanding by turns genuine love and genuine hate, and always, till then, obedience and the respect of reason. It was her father who appeared tragically ridiculous; and, in turn, the whole movement against her grew grotesque in its absurdity. Here was this antique wreck, helpless, useless, powerless—merely pathetic—actually thinking that he had only to mumble in order to make her "understand!" He knew nothing; he perceived nothing; he was a ferocious egoist, like most bedridden invalids, out of touch with life,—and he thought himself justified in making destinies, and capable of making them! Sophia could not, perhaps, define the feelings which overwhelmed her; but she was conscious of their tendency. They aged her, by years.



They aged her so that, in a kind of momentary ecstasy of insight, she felt older than her father himself.

"You will be a good girl," he said. "I'm sure o' that."

It was too painful. The grotesqueness of her father's complacency humiliated her past bearing. She was humiliated, not for herself, but for him. Singular creature! She ran out of the room.

Fortunately Constance was passing in the corridor, otherwise Sophia had been found guilty of a great breach of duty.

"Go to father," she whispered hysterically to Constance and fled upwards to the second floor.

#### IV.

The next morning, early, Sophia stood gazing out of the window at the Square. It was Saturday, and all over the Square little stalls, with yellow linen roofs, were being erected for the principal market of the week. In those barbaric days Bursley had a majestic edifice, black as basalt, for the sale of dead animals by the limb and rib—it was entitled "the Shambles"—but vegetables, fruit, cheese, eggs, and pikelets were still sold under canvas. Eggs are now offered at five farthings apiece in a palace that cost twenty-five thousand pounds. Yet you will find people in Bursley ready to assert that things generally are not what they were, and that in particular the romance of life has gone. But until it has gone it is never romance. To Sophia, though she was in a mood which usually stimulates the sense of the romantic, there was nothing of romance in this picturesque tented field. It was just the market. Holl's, the leading grocer's, was already open, at the extremity of the Square, and a boy apprentice was sweeping the pavement in front of it. The public-houses

were open, several of them specialising in hot rum at 5.30 a.m. The town-crier, in his blue coat with red facings, crossed the Square, carrying his big bell by the tongue. There was the same shocking hole in one of Mrs. Povey's (confectioner's) window-curtains—a hole which even her recent travail could scarcely excuse. Such matters it was that Sophia noticed with dull, smarting eyes.

"Sophia, you'll take your death of cold standing there like that!"

She jumped. The voice was her mother's. That vigorous woman, after a calm night by the side of the paralytic, was already up and neatly dressed. She carried a bottle and an egg-cup, and a small quantity of jam in a table-spoon.

"Get into bed again, do! There's a dear! You're shivering."

White Sophia obeyed. It was true; she was shivering. Constance awoke. Mrs. Baines went to the dressing-table and filled the egg-cup out of the bottle.

"Who's that for, mother?" Constance asked sleepily.

"It's for Sophia," said Mrs. Baines, with good cheer. "Now, Sophia!" And she advanced with the egg-cup in one hand and the table-spoon in the other.

"What is it, mother?" asked Sophia, who well knew what it was.

"Castor-oil, my dear," said Mrs. Baines, winningly.

"I don't want any, mother," said Sophia, in dejection. "I'm quite well."

"You simply ate nothing all day yesterday," said Mrs. Baines. And she added, "Come!" As if to say, "There's always this silly fuss with castor-oil. Don't keep me waiting."

"I don't *want* any," said Sophia, irritated and captious.

The two girls lay side by side, on their backs. They seemed very thin and fragile in comparison with the solidity of their mother. Constance wisely held her peace.

Mrs. Baines put her lips together, meaning: "This is becoming tedious. I shall have to be angry in another moment."

"Come!" said she again.

The girls could hear her foot tapping on the floor.

"I really don't want it, mamma," Sophia fought. "I suppose I ought to know whether I need it or not!" This was insolence.

"Sophia, will you take this medicine, or won't you?"

In conflicts with her children, the mother's ultimatum always took the formula in which this phrase was cast. The girls knew, when things had arrived at the pitch of "or won't you," spoken in Mrs. Baines's firmest tone, that the end was upon them. Never had the ultimatum failed.

There was a silence.

"And I'll thank you to mind your manners," Mrs. Baines added.

"I won't take it," said Sophia, sullenly and flatly; and she hid her face in the pillow.

It was a historic moment in the family life. Mrs. Baines thought the last day had come. But still she held herself in dignity while the apocalypse roared in her ears.

"*Of course I can't force you to take it,*" she said with superb evenness, masking anger by compassionate grief. "You're a big girl and a naughty girl. And if you will be ill you must."

Upon this immense admission, Mrs. Baines departed. Constance trembled.

Nor was that all. In the middle of the morning, when Mrs. Baines was pricing new potatoes at a stall at the top

end of the Square, and Constance choosing threepenny-worth of flowers at the same stall, whom should they both see, walking all alone across the empty corner by the Bank, but Sophia Baines! The Square was busy and populous, and Sophia was only visible behind a foreground of restless, chattering figures. But she was unmistakably seen. She had been beyond the Square and was returning. Constance could scarcely believe her eyes. Mrs. Baines's heart jumped. For let it be said that the girls never under any circumstances went forth without permission, and scarcely ever alone. That Sophia should be at large in the town, without leave, without notice, exactly as if she were her own mistress, was a proposition which a day earlier had been inconceivable. Yet there she was, and moving with a leisureliness that must be described as effrontery!

Red with apprehension, Constance wondered what would happen. Mrs. Baines said nought of her feelings, did not even indicate that she had seen the scandalous, the breath-taking sight. And they descended the Square laden with the lighter portions of what they had bought during an hour of buying. They went into the house by the King Street door; and the first thing they heard was the sound of the piano upstairs. Nothing happened. Mr. Povey had his dinner alone; then the table was laid for them, and the bell rung, and Sophia came insolently downstairs to join her mother and sister. And nothing happened. The dinner was silently eaten, and Constance having rendered thanks to God, Sophia rose abruptly to go.

"Sophia!"

"Yes, mother."

"Constance, stay where you are," said Mrs. Baines

suddenly to Constance, who had meant to flee. Constance was therefore destined to be present at the happening, doubtless in order to emphasise its importance and seriousness.

"Sophia," Mrs. Baines resumed to her younger daughter in an ominous voice. "No, please shut the door. There is no reason why everybody in the house should hear. Come right into the room—right in! That's it. Now, what were you doing out in the town this morning?"

Sophia was fidgeting nervously with the edge of her little black apron, and worrying a seam of the carpet with her toes. She bent her head towards her left shoulder, at first smiling vaguely. She said nothing, but every limb, every glance, every curve, was speaking. Mrs. Baines sat firmly in her own rocking-chair, full of the sensation that she had Sophia, as it were, writhing on the end of a skewer. Constance was braced into a moveless anguish.

"I will have an answer," pursued Mrs. Baines. "What were you doing out in the town this morning?"

"I just went out," answered Sophia at length, still with eyes downcast, and in a rather simpering tone.

"Why did you go out? You said nothing to me about going out. I heard Constance ask you if you were coming with us to the market, and you said, very rudely, that you weren't."

"I didn't say it rudely," Sophia objected.

"Yes you did. And I'll thank you not to answer back."

"I didn't mean to say it rudely, did I, Constance?" Sophia's head turned sharply to her sister. Constance knew not where to look.

"Don't answer back," Mrs. Baines repeated sternly.

"And don't try to drag Constance into this, for I won't have it."

"Oh, of course Constance is always right!" observed Sophia, with an irony whose unparalleled impudence shook Mrs. Baines to her massive foundations.

"Do you want me to have to smack you, child?"

Her temper flashed out and you could see ringlets vibrating under the provocation of Sophia's sauciness. Then Sophia's lower lip began to fall and to bulge outwards, and all the muscles of her face seemed to slacken.

"You are a very naughty girl," said Mrs. Baines, with restraint. ("I've got her," said Mrs. Baines to herself. "I may just as well keep my temper.")

And a sob broke out of Sophia. She was behaving like a little child. She bore no trace of the young maiden sedately crossing the Square without leave and without an escort.

("I knew she was going to cry," said Mrs. Baines, breathing relief.)

"I'm waiting," said Mrs. Baines aloud.

A second sob. Mrs. Baines manufactured patience to meet the demand.

"You tell me not to answer back, and then you say you're waiting," Sophia blubbered thickly.

"What's that you say? How can I tell what you say if you talk like that?" (But Mrs. Baines failed to hear out of discretion, which is better than valour.)

"It's of no consequence," Sophia blurted forth in a sob. She was weeping now, and tears were ricocheting off her lovely crimson cheeks onto the carpet; her whole body was trembling.

"Don't be a great baby," Mrs. Baines enjoined, with a touch of rough persuasiveness in her voice.

"It's you who make me cry," said Sophia, bitterly. "You make me cry and then you call me a great baby!" And sobs ran through her frame like waves one after another. She spoke so indistinctly that her mother now really had some difficulty in catching her words.

"Sophia," said Mrs. Baines, with god-like calm, "it is not I who make you cry. It is your guilty conscience makes you cry. I have merely asked you a question, and I intend to have an answer."

"I've told you." Here Sophia checked the sobs with an immense effort.

"What have you told me?"

"I just went out."

"I will have no trifling," said Mrs. Baines. "What did you go out for, and without telling me? If you had told me afterwards, when I came in, of your own accord, it might have been different. But no, not a word! It is I who have to ask! Now, quick! I can't wait any longer."

("I gave way over the castor-oil, my girl," Mrs. Baines said in her own breast. "But not again! Not again!")

"I don't know," Sophia murmured.

"What do you mean—you don't know?"

The sobbing recommenced tempestuously. "I mean I don't know. I just went out." Her voice rose; it was noisy, but scarcely articulate. "What if I did go out?"

"Sophia, I am not going to be talked to like this. If you think because you're leaving school you can do exactly as you like——"

"Do I want to leave school?" yelled Sophia, stamping. In a moment a hurricane of emotion overwhelmed her, as though that stamping of the foot had released the demons of the storm. Her face was transfigured by un-

controllable passion. "You all want to make me miserable!" she shrieked with terrible violence. "And now I can't even go out! You are a horrid, cruel woman, and I hate you! And you can do what you like! Put me in prison if you like! I know you'd be glad if I was dead!"

She dashed from the room, banging the door with a shock that made the house rattle. And she had shouted so loud that she might have been heard in the shop, and even in the kitchen. It was a startling experience for Mrs. Baines. Mrs. Baines, why did you saddle yourself with a witness? Why did you so positively say that you intended to have an answer?

"Really," she stammered, pulling her dignity about her shoulders like a garment that the wind has snatched off. "I never dreamed that poor girl had such a dreadful temper! What a pity it is, for her *own* sake!" It was the best she could do.

## V.

On the Sunday afternoon Mrs. Baines sat thinking, in exactly the same posture as Sophia's two afternoons previously. She would have been surprised to hear that her attitude, bearing, and expression powerfully recalled those of her reprehensible daughter. But it was so. A good angel made her restless, and she went idly to the window and glanced upon the empty, shuttered Square. She too, majestic matron, had strange, brief yearnings for an existence more romantic than this; shootings across her spirit's firmament of tailed comets; soft, inexplicable melancholies. The good angel, withdrawing her from such a mood, directed her gaze to a particular spot at the top of the square.

She passed at once out of the room—not precisely in



a hurry, yet without wasting time. In a recess under the stairs, immediately outside the door, was a box about a foot square and eighteen inches deep covered with black American cloth. She bent down and unlocked this box, which was padded within and contained the Baines silver tea-service. She drew from the box teapot, sugar-bowl, milk-jug, sugar-tongs, hot-water jug, and cake-stand (a flattish dish with an arching semicircular handle)—chased vessels, silver without and silver-gilt within; glittering heir-looms that shone in the dark corner like the secret pride of respectable families. These she put on a tray that always stood on end in the recess. Then she looked upwards through the banisters to the second floor.

"Maggie!" she piercingly whispered.

"Yes, mum," came a voice.

"Are you dressed?"

"Yes, mum. I'm just coming."

"Well, put on your muslin." "Apron," Mrs. Baines implied.

Maggie understood.

"Take these for tea," said Mrs. Baines when Maggie descended. "Better rub them over. You know where the cake is—that new one. The best cups. And the silver spoons."

They both heard a knock at the side-door, far off, below.

"There!" exclaimed Mrs. Baines. "Now take these right down into the kitchen before you open."

"Yes, mum," said Maggie, departing.

Mrs. Baines was wearing a black alpaca apron. She removed it and put on another one of black satin embroidered with yellow flowers, which, by merely inserting her arm into the chamber, she had taken from off the

chest of drawers in her bedroom. Then she fixed herself in the drawing-room.

Maggie returned, rather short of breath, convoying the visitor.

"Ah! Miss Chetwynd," said Mrs. Baines, rising to welcome. "I'm sure I'm delighted to see you. I saw you coming down the Square, and I said to myself, 'Now, I do hope Miss Chetwynd isn't going to forget us.'"

Miss Chetwynd, simpering momentarily, came forward with that self-conscious, slightly histrionic air, which is one of the penalties of pedagogy. She lived under the eyes of her pupils. Her life was one ceaseless effort to avoid doing anything which might influence her charges for evil or shock the natural sensitiveness of their parents.

She was a pinched virgin, aged forty, and not "well off;" in her family the gift of success had been monopolised by her elder sister. For these characteristics Mrs. Baines, as a matron in easy circumstances, pitied Miss Chetwynd. On the other hand, Miss Chetwynd could choose ground from which to look down upon Mrs. Baines, who after all was in trade. Miss Chetwynd had no trace of the local accent; she spoke with a southern refinement which the Five Towns, while making fun of it, envied. All her O's had a genteel leaning towards "ow," as ritualism leans towards Romanism. And she was the fount of etiquette, a wonder of correctness; in the eyes of her pupils' parents not so much "a perfect *lady*" as "a *perfect* lady." So that it was an extremely nice question whether, upon the whole, Mrs. Baines secretly condescended to Miss Chetwynd or Miss Chetwynd to Mrs. Baines. Perhaps Mrs. Baines, by virtue of her wifedom, carried the day.

Miss Chetwynd, carefully and precisely seated, opened

the conversation by explaining that even if Mrs. Baines had not written she should have called in any case, as she made a practice of calling at the homes of her pupils in vacation time: which was true. Mrs. Baines, it should be stated, had on Friday afternoon sent to Miss Chetwynd one of her most luxurious notes—lavender-coloured paper with scalloped edges, the selectest mode of the day—to announce, in her Italian hand, that Constance and Sophia would both leave school at the end of the next term, and giving reasons in regard to Sophia.

Before the visitor had got very far, Maggie came in with a lacquered tea-caddy and the silver teapot and a silver spoon on a lacquered tray. Mrs. Baines, while continuing to talk, chose a key from her bunch, unlocked the tea-caddy, and transferred four teaspoonfuls of tea from it to the teapot and relocked the caddy.

“Strawberry,” she mysteriously whispered to Maggie; and Maggie disappeared, bearing the tray and its contents.

“And how is your sister? It is quite a long time since she was down here,” Mrs. Baines went on to Miss Chetwynd, after whispering “strawberry.”

The remark was merely in the way of small-talk—for the hostess felt a certain unwilling hesitation to approach the topic of daughters—but it happened to suit the social purpose of Miss Chetwynd to a nicety. Miss Chetwynd was a vessel brimming with great tidings.

“She is very well, thank you,” said Miss Chetwynd, and her expression grew exceedingly vivacious. Her face glowed with pride as she added, “Of course everything is changed now.”

“Indeed?” murmured Mrs. Baines, with polite curiosity.

“Yes,” said Miss Chetwynd. “You’ve not heard?”

"No," said Mrs. Baines. Miss Chetwynd knew that she had not heard.

"About Elizabeth's engagement? To the Reverend Archibald Jones?"

It is the fact that Mrs. Baines was taken aback. She did nothing indiscreet; she did not give vent to her excusable amazement that the elder Miss Chetwynd should be engaged to anyone at all, as some women would have done in the stress of the moment. She kept her presence of mind.

"This is really *most* interesting!" said she.

It was. For Archibald Jones was one of the idols of the Wesleyan Methodist Connexion, a special preacher famous throughout England. At "Anniversaries" and "Trust sermons," Archibald Jones had probably no rival. His Christian name helped him; it was a luscious, resounding mouthful for admirers. He was not an itinerant minister, migrating every three years. His function was to direct the affairs of the "Book Room," the publishing department of the Connexion.

After tea had been served, Mrs. Baines gradually recovered her position, both in her own private esteem and in the deference of Miss Aline Chetwynd.

"Yes," said she. "You can talk about your sister, and you can call *him* Archibald, and you can mince up your words. But have you got a tea-service like this? Can you conceive more perfect strawberry jam than this? Did not my dress cost more than you spend on your clothes in a year? Has a man ever looked at you? After all, is there not something about my situation . . . in short, something . . .?"

She did not say this aloud. She in no way deviated from the scrupulous politeness of a hostess. There was

nothing in even her tone to indicate that Mrs. John Baines was a personage. Yet it suddenly occurred to Miss Chetwynd that her pride in being the prospective sister-in-law of the Rev. Archibald Jones would be better for awhile in her pocket. And she inquired after Mr. Baines. After this the conversation limped somewhat.

"I suppose you weren't surprised by my letter?" said Mrs. Baines.

"I was and I wasn't," answered Miss Chetwynd, in her professional manner and not her manner of a prospective sister-in-law. "Of course I am naturally sorry to lose two such good pupils, but we can't keep our pupils for ever." She smiled; she was not without fortitude—it is easier to lose pupils than to replace them. "Still"—a pause—"what you say of Sophia is perfectly true, perfectly. She is quite as advanced as Constance. Still"—another pause and a more rapid enunciation—"Sophia is by no means an ordinary girl."

"I hope she hasn't been a very great trouble to you?"

"Oh *no!*" exclaimed Miss Chetwynd. "Sophia and I have got on very well together. I have always tried to appeal to her reason. I have never *forced* her . . . Now, with some girls . . . In some ways I look on Sophia as the most remarkable girl—not pupil—but the most remarkable—what shall I say?—individuality, that I have ever met with." And her demeanour added, "And, mind you, this is something—from me!"

"Indeed!" said Mrs. Baines. She told herself, "I am not your common foolish parent. I see my children impartially. I am incapable of being flattered concerning them."

Nevertheless she was flattered, and the thought shaped itself that really Sophia was no ordinary girl.

"I suppose she has talked to you about becoming a teacher?" asked Miss Chetwynd, taking a morsel of the unparalleled jam.

She held the spoon with her thumb and three fingers. Her fourth finger, in matters of honest labour, would never associate with the other three; delicately curved, it always drew proudly away from them.

"Has she mentioned that to you?" Mrs. Baines demanded, startled.

"Oh yes!" said Miss Chetwynd. "Several times. Sophia is a very secretive girl, very—but I think I may say I have always had her confidence. There have been times when Sophia and I have been very near each other. Elizabeth was much struck with her. Indeed, I may tell you that in one of her last letters to me she spoke of Sophia and said she had mentioned her to Mr. Jones, and Mr. Jones remembered her quite well."

Impossible for even a wise, uncommon parent not to be affected by such an announcement!

"I daresay your sister will give up her school now," observed Mrs. Baines, to divert attention from her self-consciousness.

"Oh *no!*" And this time Mrs. Baines had genuinely shocked Miss Chetwynd. "Nothing would induce Elizabeth to give up the cause of education. Archibald takes the keenest interest in the school. Oh no! Not for worlds!"

"*Then you think Sophia would make a good teacher?*" asked Mrs. Baines with apparent inconsequence, and with a smile. But the words marked an epoch in her mind. All was over.

"I think she is very much set on it and——"

"That wouldn't affect her father—or me," said Mrs. Baines quickly.

"Certainly not! I merely say that she is' very much set on it. Yes, she would, at any rate, make a teacher far superior to the average." ("That girl has got the better of her mother without me!" she reflected.) "Ah! Here is dear Constance!"

Constance, tempted beyond her strength by the sounds of the visit and the colloquy, had slipped into the room.

"I've left both doors open, mother," she excused herself for quitting her father, and kissed Miss Chetwynd.

She blushed, but she blushed happily, and really made a most creditable *début* as a young lady. Her mother rewarded her by taking her into the conversation. And history was soon made.

So Sophia was apprenticed to Miss Aline Chetwynd. Mrs. Baines bore herself greatly. It was Miss Chetwynd who had urged, and her respect for Miss Chetwynd . . . Also somehow the Reverend Archibald Jones came into the cause. . . . Of course the idea of Sophia ever going to London was ridiculous, ridiculous! (Mrs. Baines secretly feared that the ridiculous might happen; but, with the Reverend Archibald Jones on the spot, the worst could be faced.) Sophia must understand that even the apprenticeship in Bursley was merely a trial. They would see how things went on. She had to thank Miss Chetwynd . . .

"I made Miss Chetwynd come and talk to mother," said Sophia magnificently one night to simple Constance, as if to imply, "Your Miss Chetwynd is my washpot."

To Constance, Sophia's mere enterprise was just as staggering as her success. Fancy her deliberately going out that Saturday morning, after her mother's definite decision, to enlist Miss Chetwynd in her aid!

There is no need to insist on the tragic grandeur of

Mrs. Baines's renunciation—a renunciation which implied her acceptance of a change in the balance of power in her realm. Part of its tragedy was that none, not even Constance, could divine the intensity of Mrs. Baines's suffering. She had no confidant; she was incapable of showing a wound. But when she lay awake at night by the organism which had once been her husband, she dwelt long and deeply on the martyrdom of her life. What had she done to deserve it? Always had she conscientiously endeavoured to be kind, just, patient. And she knew herself to be sagacious and prudent. In the frightful and unguessed trials of her existence as a wife, surely she might have been granted consolations as a mother! Yet no; it had not been! And she felt all the bitterness of age against youth—youth egotistic, harsh, cruel, uncompromising; youth that is so crude, so ignorant of life, so slow to understand!

## CHAPTER IV.

## ELEPHANT.

## I.

"SOPHIA, will you come and see the elephant? Do come!" Constance entered the drawing-room with this request on her eager lips.

"No," said Sophia, with a touch of condescension. "I'm far too busy for elephants."

Only two years had passed; but both girls were grown up now; long sleeves, long skirts, hair that had settled down in life; and a demeanour immensely serious, as though existence were terrific in its responsibilities; yet sometimes childhood surprisingly broke through the crust of gravity, as now in Constance, aroused by such things



as elephants, and proclaimed with vivacious gestures that it was not dead after all. The sisters were sharply differentiated. Constance wore the black alpaca apron and the scissors at the end of a long black elastic, which indicated her vocation in the shop. She was proving a considerable success in the millinery department. She had learnt how to talk to people, and was, in her modest way, very self-possessed. She was getting a little stouter. Everybody liked her. Sophia had developed into the student. Time had accentuated her reserve. Her sole friend was Miss Chetwynd, with whom she was, having regard to the disparity of their ages, very intimate. At home she spoke little. She lacked amiability; as her mother said, she was "touchy." She required diplomacy from others, but did not render it again. Her attitude, indeed, was one of half-hidden disdain, now gentle, now coldly bitter. She would not wear an apron, in an age when aprons were almost essential to decency. No! She would *not* wear an apron, and there was an end of it. She was not so tidy as Constance, and if Constance's hands had taken on the coarse texture which comes from commerce with needles, pins, artificial flowers, and stuffs, Sophia's fine hands were seldom innocent of ink. But Sophia was splendidly beautiful. And even her mother and Constance had an instinctive idea that that face was, at any rate, a partial excuse for her asperity.

"Well," said Constance, "if you won't, I do believe I shall ask mother if she will."

Sophia, bending over her books, made no answer. But the top of her head said: "This has no interest for me whatever."

Constance left the room, and in a moment returned with her mother.

"Sophia," said her mother, with gay excitement. "you might go and sit with your father for a bit while Constance and I just run up to the playground to see the elephant. You can work just as well in there as here. Your father's asleep."

"Oh, very well!" Sophia agreed haughtily. "Whatever is all this fuss about an elephant? Anyhow, it'll be quieter in your room. The noise here is splitting." She gave a supercilious glance into the Square as she languidly rose.

It was the morning of the third day of Bursley Wakes; not the modern finicking and respectable, but an orgiastic carnival, gross in all its manifestations of joy. The whole centre of the town was given over to the furious pleasures of the people. Most of the Square was occupied by Wombwell's Menagerie, in a vast oblong tent, whose raging beasts roared and growled day and night. And spreading away from this supreme attraction, right up through the market-place past the Town Hall to Duck Bank, Duck Square and the waste land called the "playground," were hundreds of booths with banners displaying all the delights of the horrible. You could see the atrocities of the French Revolution, and of the Fiji Islands, and the ravages of unspeakable diseases, and the living flesh of a nearly nude human female guaranteed to turn the scale at twenty-two stone, and the skeletons of the mysterious phantoscope, and the bloody contests of champions naked to the waist (with the chance of picking up a red tooth as a relic). You could try your strength by hitting an image of a fellow-creature in the stomach, and test your aim by knocking off the heads of other images with a wooden ball. You could also shoot with rifles at various targets. All the streets were lined with stalls loaded with

food in heaps, chiefly dried fish, the entrails of animals, and ginger-bread. All the public-houses were crammed, and frenzied jolly drunkards, men and women, lunged along the pavements everywhere, their shouts vying with the trumpets, horns, and drums of the booths, and the shrieking, rattling toys that the children carried.

On the previous night one of the three Wombwell elephants had suddenly knelt on a man in the tent; he had then walked out of the tent and picked up another man at haphazard from the crowd which was staring at the great pictures in front, and tried to put this second man into his mouth. Being stopped by his Indian attendant with a pitchfork, he placed the man on the ground and stuck his tusk through an artery of the victim's arm. He then, amid unexampled excitement, suffered himself to be led away. He was conducted to the rear of the tent, just in front of Baines's shuttered windows, and by means of stakes, pulleys, and ropes forced to his knees. His head was whitewashed, and six men of the Rifle Corps were engaged to shoot at him at a distance of five yards, while constables kept the crowd off with truncheons. He died instantly, rolling over with a soft thud. The crowd cheered, and, intoxicated by their importance, the Volunteers fired three more volleys into the carcase, and were then borne off as heroes to different inns. The elephant, by the help of his two companions, was got onto a railway lorry and disappeared into the night. Such was the greatest sensation that has ever occurred, or perhaps will ever occur, in Bursley. The excitement about the repeal of the Corn Laws, or about Inkerman, was feeble compared to that excitement. Mr. Critchlow, who had been called on to put a hasty tourniquet round the arm of the second victim, had popped in afterwards to tell

John Baines all about it. Mr. Baines's interest, however, had been slight. Mr. Critchlow succeeded better with the ladies, who, though they had witnessed the shooting from the drawing-room, were thirsty for the most trifling details.

The next day it was known that the elephant lay near the playground, pending the decision of the Chief Bailiff and the Medical Officer as to his burial. And everybody had to visit the corpse. No social exclusiveness could withstand the seduction of that dead elephant. Pilgrims travelled from all the Five Towns to see him.

"We're going now," said Mrs. Baines, after she had assumed her bonnet and shawl.

"All right," said Sophia, pretending to be absorbed in study, as she sat on the sofa at the foot of her father's bed.

And Constance, having put her head in at the door, drew her mother after her like a magnet.

Then Sophia heard a remarkable conversation in the passage.

"Are you going up to see the elephant, Mrs. Baines?" asked the voice of Mr. Povey.

"Yes. Why?"

"I think I had better come with you. The crowd is sure to be very rough." Mr. Povey's tone was firm; he had a position.

"But the shop?"

"We shall not be long," said Mr. Povey.

"Oh yes, mother," Constance added appealingly.

Sophia felt the house thrill as the side-door banged. She sprang up and watched the three cross King Street diagonally, and so plunge into the Wakes. This triple departure was surely the crowning tribute to the dead elephant! It was simply astonishing. It caused Sophia

to perceive that she had miscalculated the importance of the elephant. It made her regret her scorn of the elephant as an attraction. She was left behind; and the joy of life was calling her. She could see down into the Vaults on the opposite side of the street, where working men—potters and colliers—in their best clothes, some with high hats, were drinking, gesticulating, and laughing in a row at a long counter.

She noticed, while she was thus at the bedroom window, a young man ascending King Street, followed by a porter trundling a flat barrow of luggage. He passed slowly under the very window. She flushed. She had evidently been startled by the sight of this young man into no ordinary state of commotion. She glanced at the books on the sofa, and then at her father. Mr. Baines, thin and gaunt, and acutely pitiable, still slept. His brain had almost ceased to be active now; he had to be fed and tended like a bearded baby, and he would sleep for hours at a stretch even in the daytime. Sophia left the room. A moment later she ran into the shop, an apparition that amazed the three young lady assistants. At the corner near the window on the fancy side a little nook had been formed by screening off a portion of the counter with large flower-boxes placed end-up. This corner had come to be known as "Miss Baines's corner." Sophia hastened to it, squeezing past a young lady assistant in the narrow space between the back of the counter and the shelf-lined wall. She sat down in Constance's chair and pretended to look for something. She had examined herself in the cheval-glass in the show-room, on her way from the sick-chamber. When she heard a voice near the door of the shop asking first for Mr. Povey and then for Mrs. Baines, she rose, and seizing the object nearest

to her, which happened to be a pair of scissors, she hurried towards the show-room stairs as though the scissors had been a grail, passionately sought and to be jealously hidden away. She wanted to stop and turn round, but something prevented her. She was at the end of the counter, under the curving stairs, when one of the assistants said:

"I suppose you don't know when Mr. Povey or your mother are likely to be back, Miss Sophia? Here's—"

It was a divine release for Sophia.

"They're—I—" she stammered, turning round abruptly. Luckily she was still sheltered behind the counter.

The young man whom she had seen in the street came boldly forward.

"Good morning, Miss Sophia," said he, hat in hand. "It is a long time since I had the pleasure of seeing you."

Never had she blushed as she blushed then. She scarcely knew what she was doing as she moved slowly towards her sister's corner again, the young man following her on the customer's side of the counter.

## II.

She knew that he was a traveller for the most renowned and gigantic of all Manchester wholesale firms—Birkinshaws. But she did not know his name, which was Gerald Scales. He was a rather short but extremely well-proportioned man of thirty, with fair hair, and a distinguished appearance, as became a representative of Birkinshaws. His broad, tight necktie, with an edge of white collar showing above it, was particularly elegant. He had been on the road for Birkinshaws for several years; but Sophia had only seen him once before in her life, when she was a little girl, three years ago. The relations between the

travellers of the great firms and their solid, sure clients in small towns were in those days often cordially intimate. The traveller came with the lustre of a historic reputation around him; there was no need to fawn for orders; and the client's immense and immaculate respectability made him the equal of no matter what ambassador. It was a case of mutual esteem, and of that confidence-generating phenomenon, "an old account." The tone in which a commercial traveller of middle age would utter the phrase "an old account" revealed in a flash all that was romantic, prim, and stately in mid-Victorian commerce. In the days of Baines, after one of the elaborately engraved advice-circulars had arrived ("Our Mr. ——— will have the pleasure of waiting upon you on — day next, the — inst.") John might in certain cases be expected to say, on the morning of — day, "Missis, what have ye gotten for supper to-night?"

Mr. Gerald Scales had never been asked to supper; he had never even seen John Baines; but, as the youthful successor of an aged traveller who had had the pleasure of St. Luke's Square, on behalf of Birkinshaws, since before railways, Mrs. Baines had treated him with a faint agreeable touch of maternal familiarity; and, both her daughters being once in the shop during his visit, she had on that occasion commanded the gawky girls to shake hands with him.

Sophia had never forgotten that glimpse. The young man without a name had lived in her mind, brightly glowing, as the very symbol and incarnation of the masculine and the elegant.

The renewed sight of him seemed to have wakened her out of a sleep. Assuredly she was not the same Sophia. As she sat in her sister's chair in the corner,

entrenched behind the perpendicular boxes, playing nervously with the scissors, her beautiful face was transfigured into the ravishingly angelic. It would have been impossible for Mr. Gerald Scales, or anybody else, to credit, as he gazed at those lovely, sensitive, vivacious responsive features, that Sophia was not a character of heavenly sweetness and perfection. She did not know what she was doing; she was nothing but the exquisite expression of a deep instinct to attract and charm. Her soul itself emanated from her in an atmosphere of allurements and acquiescence. Could those laughing lips hang in a heavy pout? Could that delicate and mild voice be harsh? Could those burning eyes be coldly inimical? Never! The idea was inconceivable! And Mr. Gerald Scales, with his head over the top of the boxes, yielded to the spell. Remarkable that Mr. Gerald Scales, with all his experience, should have had to come to Bursley to find the pearl, the paragon, the ideal! But so it was. They met in an equal abandonment; the only difference between them was that Mr. Scales, by force of habit, kept his head.

"I see it's your wakes here," said he.

He was polite to the wakes; but now, with the least inflection in the world, he put the wakes at its proper level in the scheme of things as a local unimportance! She adored him for this; she was athirst for sympathy in the task of scorning everything local.

"I expect you didn't know," she said, implying that there was every reason why a man of his mundane interests should not know.

"I should have remembered if I had thought," said he. "But I didn't think. What's this about an elephant?"

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "Have you heard of that?"



"My porter was full of it."

"Well," she said, "of course it's a very big thing in Bursley."

As she smiled in gentle pity of poor Bursley, he naturally did the same. And he thought how much more advanced and broad the younger generation was than the old! He would never have dared to express his real feelings about Bursley to Mrs. Baines, or even to Mr. Povey (who was, however, of no generation); yet here was a young woman actually sharing them.

She told him all the history of the elephant.

"Must have been very exciting," he commented, despite himself.

"Do you know," she replied, "*it was*."

After all, Bursley was climbing in their opinion.

"And mother and my sister and Mr. Povey have all gone to see it. That's why they're not here."

That the elephant should have caused both Mr. Povey and Mrs. Baines to forget that the representative of Birkinshaws was due to call was indeed a final victory for the elephant.

"But not you!" he exclaimed.

"No," she said. "Not me."

"Why didn't you go too?" He continued his flattering investigations with a generous smile.

"I simply didn't care to," said she, proudly nonchalant.

"And I suppose you are in charge here?"

"No," she answered. "I just happened to have run down here for these scissors. That's all."

"I often see your sister," said he. "'Often' do I say?—that is, generally, when I come; but never you."

"I'm never in the shop," she said. "It's just an accident to-day."

"Oh! So you leave the shop to your sister?"

"Yes." She said nothing of her teaching.

Then there was a silence. Sophia was very thankful to be hidden from the curiosity of the shop. The shop could see nothing of her, and only the back of the young man; and the conversation had been conducted in low voices. She tapped her foot, stared at the worn, polished surface of the counter, with the brass yard-measure nailed along its edge, and then she uneasily turned her gaze to the left and seemed to be examining the backs of the black bonnets which were perched on high stands in the great window. Then her eyes caught his for an important moment.

"Yes," she breathed. Somebody had to say something. If the shop missed the murmur of their voices the shop would wonder what had happened to them.

Mr. Scales looked at his watch. "I daresay if I come in again about two—" he began.

"Oh yes, they're *sure* to be in then," she burst out before he could finish his sentence.

And as she flitted upstairs to resume watch over her father she sought to devise an innocent-looking method by which she might see Mr. Scales when he next called. And she speculated as to what his name was.

### III. .

When Sophia arrived in the bedroom, she was startled because her father's head and beard were not in their accustomed place on the pillow. She could only make out something vaguely unusual sloping off the side of the bed. A few seconds passed—not to be measured in time—and she saw that the upper part of his body had slipped down, and his head was hanging, inverted, near the floor

between the bed and the ottoman. His face, neck and hands were dark and congested; his mouth was open, and the tongue protruded between the black, swollen, mucous lips; his eyes were prominent and coldly staring. The fact was that Mr. Baines had wakened up, and, being restless, had slid out partially from his bed and died of asphyxia. After having been unceasingly watched for fourteen years, he had, with an invalid's natural perverseness, taken advantage of Sophia's brief dereliction to expire. Say what you will, amid Sophia's horror, and her terrible grief and shame, she had visitings of the idea: he did it on purpose!

She ran out of the room, knowing by intuition that he was dead, and shrieked out, "Maggie," at the top of her voice; the house echoed.

"Yes, miss," said Maggie, quite close, coming out of Mr. Povey's chamber with a slop-pail.

"Fetch Mr. Critchlow at once. Be quick. Just as you are. It's father—"

No sleepless night had ever been so long to Sophia as the three minutes which elapsed before Mr. Critchlow came.

"Why did I forget father?" she asked herself with awe. "I only meant to tell *him* that they were all out, and run back. Why did I forget father?" She would never be able to persuade anybody that she had literally forgotten her father's existence for quite ten minutes; but it was true, though shocking.

Then there were noises downstairs.

"Bless us! Bless us!" came the unpleasant voice of Mr. Critchlow as he bounded up the stairs on his long legs. "What's amiss?" He was wearing his white apron, and he carried his spectacles in his bony hand.

"It's father—he's—" Sophia faltered.

She stood away so that he should enter the room first. He glanced at her keenly and as it were resentfully, and went in. She followed, timidly, remaining near the door while Mr. Critchlow inspected her handiwork. He put on his spectacles with strange deliberation, and then, bending his knees outwards, thus lowered his body so that he could examine John Baines point-blank. He remained staring like this, his hands on his sharp apron-covered knees, for a little space; and then he seized the inert mass and restored it to the bed, and wiped those clotted lips with his apron.

Sophia heard loud breathing behind her. It was Maggie. She heard a huge, snorting sob; Maggie was showing her emotion.

"Go fetch doctor!" Mr. Critchlow rasped. "And don't stand gaping there!"

"Run for the doctor, Maggie," said Sophia.

"How came ye to let him fall?" Mr. Critchlow demanded.

"I was out of the room. I just ran down into the shop—"

"Gallivanting with that young Scales!" said Mr. Critchlow, with devilish ferocity. "Well, you've killed yer father; that's all!"

Her pride brought up tremendous reinforcements, and she approached the bed.

"Is he dead?" she asked in a quiet tone. (Somewhere within a voice was whispering, "So his name is Scales.")

"Don't I tell you he's dead?"

"Pail on the stairs!"

This mild exclamation came from the passage. Mrs.

Baines, misliking the crowds abroad, had returned alone; she had left Constance in charge of Mr. Povey. Coming into her house by the shop and show-room, she had first noted the phenomenon of a pail—proof of her theory of Maggie's incurable untidiness.

"Been to see the elephant, I reckon!" said Mr. Critchlow, in fierce sarcasm, as he recognised Mrs. Baines's voice.

Sophia leaped towards the door, as though to bar her mother's entrance. But Mrs. Baines was already opening the door.

"Well, my pet—" she was beginning cheerfully.

Mr. Critchlow confronted her. And he had no more pity for the wife than for the daughter. He was furiously angry because his precious property had been irretrievably damaged by the momentary carelessness of a silly girl.

"She let him fall out o' bed, and ye're a widow now, missis!" he announced with a virulence hardly conceivable. His angular features and dark eyes expressed a murderous hate for every woman named Baines.

"Mother!" cried Sophia, "I only ran down into the shop to—to—"

She seized her mother's arm in frenzied agony.

"My child!" said Mrs. Baines, rising miraculously to the situation with a calm benevolence of tone and gesture that remained for ever sublime in the stormy heart of Sophia, "do not hold me." With infinite gentleness she loosed herself from those clasping hands. "Have you sent for the doctor?" she questioned Mr. Critchlow.

The fate of her husband presented no mysteries to Mrs. Baines. Everybody had been warned a thousand times of the danger of leaving the paralytic, whose life depended on his position, and whose fidgetiness was thereby a constant menace of death to him. For five

thousand nights she had wakened infallibly every time he stirred, and rearranged him by the flicker of a little oil lamp. But Sophia, unhappy creature, had merely left him. That was all.

Mr. Critchlow and the widow gazed, helplessly waiting, at the pitiable corpse, of which the salient part was the white beard. They knew not that they were gazing at a vanished era. John Baines had belonged to the past, to the age when men really did think of their souls, when orators by phrases could move crowds to fury or to pity, when no one had learnt to hurry, when Demos was only turning in his sleep, when the sole beauty of life resided in its inflexible and slow dignity, when hell really had no bottom, and a gilt-clasped Bible really was the secret of England's greatness. Mid-Victorian England lay on that mahogany bed. Ideals had passed away with John Baines. It is thus that ideals die; not in the conventional pageantry of honoured death, but sorrily, ignobly, while one's head is turned—

And Mr. Povey and Constance, very self-conscious, went and saw the dead elephant, and came back; and at the corner of King Street, Constance exclaimed brightly—

“Why! who's gone out and left the side-door open?”

For the doctor had at length arrived, and Maggie, in showing him upstairs with pious haste, had forgotten to shut the door.

#### IV.

Several shutters were put up in the windows of the shop, to indicate a death, and the news instantly became known in trading circles throughout the town. Many people simultaneously remarked upon the coincidence that Mr. Baines should have died while there was a show of

mourning goods in his establishment. This coincidence was regarded as extremely sinister, and it was apparently felt that, for the sake of the mind's peace, one ought not to inquire into such things too closely. From the moment of putting up the prescribed shutters, John Baines and his funeral began to acquire importance in Bursley, and their importance grew rapidly almost from hour to hour. The wakes continued as usual, except that the Chief Constable, upon representations being made to him by Mr. Critchlow and other citizens, descended upon St. Luke's Square and forbade the activities of Wombwell's orchestra.

The Chief Constable was not the only individual enlisted by Mr. Critchlow in the service of his friend's fame. Mr. Critchlow spent hours in recalling the principal citizens to a due sense of John Baines's past greatness. He was determined that his treasured toy should vanish underground with due pomp, and he left nothing undone to that end. He went over to Hanbridge and saw the editor-proprietor of the *Staffordshire Signal* (then a two-penny weekly with no thought of Football editions), and on the very day of the funeral the *Signal* came out with a long and eloquent biography of John Baines. This biography, giving details of his public life, definitely restored him to his legitimate position in the civic memory as an ex-chief bailiff, an ex-chairman of the Burial Board, and of the Five Towns Association for the Advancement of Useful Knowledge, and also as a "prime mover" in the local Turnpike Act, in the negotiations for the new Town Hall, and in the Corinthian *façade* of the Wesleyan Chapel; it narrated the anecdote of his courageous speech from the portico of the Shambles during the riots of 1848, and it did not omit a eulogy of his steady adherence to the wise old English maxims of commerce and his avoidance

of dangerous modern methods: Even in the sixties the modern had reared its shameless head. The panegyric closed with an appreciation of the dead man's fortitude in the terrible affliction with which a divine providence had seen fit to try him; and finally the *Signal* uttered its absolute conviction that his native town would raise a cenotaph to his honour. Mr. Critchlow, being unfamiliar with the word "cenotaph," consulted Worcester's Dictionary, and when he found that it meant "a sepulchral monument to one who is buried elsewhere," he was as pleased with the *Signal's* language as with the idea, and decided that a cenotaph should come to pass.

The house and shop were transformed into a hive of preparation for the funeral. All was changed. Mr. Povey kindly slept for three nights on the parlour sofa, in order that Mrs. Baines might have his room. The funeral grew into an obsession, for multitudinous things had to be performed and done sumptuously and in strict accord with precedent. There were the family mourning, the funeral repast, the choice of the text on the memorial card, the composition of the legend on the coffin, the legal arrangements, the letters to relations, the selection of guests, and the questions of bell-ringing, hearse, plumes, number of horses, and grave-digging. Nobody had leisure for the indulgence of grief except Aunt Maria, who, after she had helped in the laying-out, simply sat down and bemoaned unceasingly for hours her absence on the fatal morning. "If I hadn't been so fixed on polishing my candlesticks," she weepingly repeated, "he mit ha' been alive and well now." Not that Aunt Maria had been informed of the precise circumstances of the death; she was not clearly aware that Mr. Baines had died through a piece of neglect. But, like Mr. Critchlow, she was convinced that there had



been only one person in the world truly capable of nursing Mr. Baines. Beyond the family, no one save Mr. Critchlow and Dr. Harrop knew just how the martyr had finished his career.

As for Aunt Maria, she was sent about her snivelling business by Aunt Harriet. The arrival in the house of this genuine aunt from Axe, of this majestic and enormous widow whom even the imperial Mrs. Baines regarded with a certain awe, set a seal of ultimate solemnity on the whole event. In Mr. Povey's bedroom Mrs. Baines fell like a child into Aunt Harriet's arms and sobbed:

"If it had been anything else but that elephant!"

Such was Mrs. Baines's sole weakness from first 'o last.

Aunt Harriet was an exhaustless fountain of authority upon every detail concerning interments. And, to a series of questions ending with the word "sister," and answers ending with the word "sister," the prodigious travail incident to the funeral was gradually and successfully accomplished. Dress and the repast exceeded all other matters in complexity and difficulty. But on the morning of the funeral Aunt Harriet had the satisfaction of beholding her younger sister the centre of a tremendous cocoon of crape, whose slightest pleat was perfect. Aunt Harriet seemed to welcome her then, like a veteran, formally into the august army of relicts. As they stood side by side surveying the special table which was being laid in the show-room for the repast, it appeared inconceivable that they had reposed together in Mr. Povey's limited bed. They descended from the show-room to the kitchen, where the last delicate dishes were inspected. The shop was, of course, closed for the day, but Mr. Povey was busy there, and in Aunt Harriet's all-seeing glance

he came next after the dishes. She rose from the kitchen to speak with him.

"You've got your boxes of gloves all ready?" she questioned him.

"Yes, Mrs. Maddack."

"You'll not forget to have a measure handy?"

"No, Mrs. Maddack."

"You'll find you'll want more of seven-and-three-quarters and eights than anything."

"Yes. I have allowed for that."

"If you place yourself behind the side-door and put your boxes on the harmonium, you'll be able to catch everyone as they come in."

"That is what I had thought of, Mrs. Maddack."

She went upstairs. Mrs. Baines had reached the show-room again, and was smoothing out creases in the white damask cloth and arranging glass dishes of jam at equal distances from each other.

"Come, sister," said Mrs. Maddack. "A last look."

And they passed into the mortuary bedroom to gaze at Mr. Baines before he should be everlastingly nailed down. In death he had recovered some of his earlier dignity; but even so he was a startling sight. The two widows bent over him, one on either side, and gravely stared at that twisted, worn white face all neatly tucked up in linen.

"I shall fetch Constance and Sophia," said Mrs. Maddack, with tears in her voice. "Do you go into the drawing-room, sister."

But Mrs. Maddack only succeeded in fetching Constance.

Then there was the sound of wheels in King Street. The long rite of the funeral was about to begin. Every

guest, after having been measured and presented with a pair of the finest black kid gloves by Mr. Povey, had to mount the crooked stairs and gaze upon the carcase of John Baines, going afterwards to the drawing-room to condole briefly with the widow. And every guest, while conscious of the enormity of so thinking, thought what an excellent thing it was that John Baines should be at last dead and gone. The tramping on the stairs was continual, and finally Mr. Baines himself went downstairs, bumping against corners, and led a *cortège* of twenty vehicles.

The funeral tea was not over at seven o'clock; five hours after the commencement of the rite. It was a gigantic and faultless meal, worthy of John Baines's distant past. Only two persons were absent from it—John Baines and Sophia. The emptiness of Sophia's chair was much noticed; Mrs. Maddack explained that Sophia was very high-strung and could not trust herself. Great efforts were put forth by the company to be lugubrious and inconsolable, but the secret relief resulting from the death would not be entirely hidden. The vast pretence of acute sorrow could not stand intact against that secret relief and the lavish richness of the food.

To the offending of sundry important relatives from a distance, Mr. Critchlow informally presided over that assemblage of grave men in high stocks and crinolined women. He had closed his shop, which had never before been closed on a week-day, and he had a great deal to say about this extraordinary closure. It was due as much to the elephant as to the funeral. The elephant had become a victim to the craze for souvenirs. Already in the night his tusks had been stolen; then his feet disappeared for umbrella-stands, and most of his flesh departed in little hunks. Everybody in Bursley had re-

solved to participate in the elephant. One consequence was that all the chemists' shops in the town were assaulted by strings of boys. "Please a pennorth o' alum to tak' smell out o' a bit o' elephant." Mr. Critchlow hated boys.

"'I'll alum ye!' says I, and I did. I alumed him out o' my shop with a pestle. If there'd been one there'd been twenty between opening and nine o'clock. 'George,' I says to my apprentice, 'shut shop up. My old friend John Baines is going to his long home to-day, and I'll close. I've had enough o' alum for one day.'"

The elephant fed the conversation until after the second relay of hot muffins. When Mr. Critchlow had eaten to his capacity, he took the *Signal* importantly from his pocket, posed his spectacles, and read the obituary all through in slow, impressive accents. Before he reached the end Mrs. Baines began to perceive that familiarity had blinded her to the heroic qualities of her late husband. The fourteen years of ceaseless care were quite genuinely forgotten, and she saw him in his strength and in his glory. When Mr. Critchlow arrived at the eulogy of the husband and father, Mrs. Baines rose and left the show-room. The guests looked at each other in sympathy for her. Mr. Critchlow shot a glance at her over his spectacles and continued steadily reading. After he had finished he approached the question of the cenotaph.

Mrs. Baines, driven from the banquet by her feelings, went into the drawing-room. Sophia was there, and Sophia, seeing tears in her mother's eyes, gave a sob, and flung herself bodily against her mother, clutching her, and hiding her face in that broad crane which she had her soft skin.

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"Mother," she wept passionately, "I want to leave the school now. I want to please you. I'll do anything in the world to please you. I'll go into the shop if you'd like me to!" Her voice lost itself in tears.

"Calm yourself, my pet," said Mrs. Baines, tenderly, caressing her. It was a triumph for the mother in the very hour when she needed a triumph.

## CHAPTER V. THE TRAVELLER.

### I.

"EXQUISITE, 1s. 11d."

These singular signs were being painted in shiny black on an unrectangular parallelogram of white cardboard by Constance one evening in the parlour. She was seated, with her left side to the fire and to the fizzing gas, at the dining-table, which was covered with a checked cloth in red and white. Her dress was of dark crimson; she wore a cameo brooch and a gold chain round her neck; over her shoulders was thrown a white knitted shawl, for the weather was extremely cold, the English climate being much more serious and downright at that day than it is now. She bent low to the task, holding her head slightly askew, putting the tip of her tongue between her lips, and expending all the energy of her soul and body in an intense effort to do what she was doing as well as it could be done.

"Splendid!" said Mr. Povey.

Mr. Povey was fronting her at the table; he had his elbows on the table, and watched her carefully, with the breathless and divine anxiety of a dreamer who is witnessing the realisation of his dream. And Constance,

without moving any part of her frame except her head, looked up at him and smiled for a moment, and he could see her delicious little nostrils at the end of her snub-nose.

Those two, without knowing or guessing it, were making history—the history of commerce. They had no suspicion that they were the forces of the future insidiously at work to destroy what the forces of the past had created, but such was the case. They were conscious merely of a desire to do their duty in the shop and to the shop; probably it had not even occurred to them that this desire, which each stimulated in the breast of the other, had assumed the dimensions of a passion. It was ageing Mr. Povey, and it had made of Constance a young lady tremendously industrious and preoccupied.

Mr. Povey had recently been giving attention to the question of tickets. It is not too much to say that Mr. Povey, to whom heaven had granted a minimum share of imagination, had nevertheless discovered his little parcel of imagination in the recesses of being, and brought it effectively to bear on tickets. Tickets ran in conventional grooves. There were heavy oblong tickets for flannels, shirting, and other stuffs in the piece; there were smaller and lighter tickets for intermediate goods; and there were diamond-shaped tickets (containing nothing but the price) for bonnets, gloves, and flimflams generally. The legends on the tickets gave no sort of original invention. The words “lasting,” “durable,” “unshrinkable,” “latest,” “cheap,” “stylish,” “novelty,” “choice” (as an adjective), “new,” and “tasteful,” exhausted the entire vocabulary of tickets. Now Mr. Povey attached importance to tickets, and since he was acknowledged to be the best window-dresser in Bursley, his views were entitled to

respect. He dreamed of other tickets, in original shapes, with original legends. In brief, he achieved, in regard to tickets, the rare feat of ridding himself of preconceived notions, and of approaching a subject with fresh, virginal eyes. When he indicated the nature of his wishes to Mr. Chawner, the wholesale stationer who supplied all the Five Towns with shop-tickets, Mr. Chawner grew uneasy and worried; Mr. Chawner was indeed shocked. For Mr. Chawner there had always been certain well-defined genera of tickets, and he could not conceive the existence of other genera. When Mr. Povey suggested circular tickets—tickets with a blue and a red line round them, tickets with legends such as “unsurpassable,” “very dainty,” or “please note,” Mr. Chawner hummed and hawed, and finally stated that it would be impossible to manufacture these preposterous tickets, these tickets which would outrage the decency of trade.

If Mr. Povey had not happened to be an exceedingly obstinate man, he might have been defeated by the crass Toryism of Mr. Chawner. But Mr. Povey was obstinate, and he had resources of ingenuity which Mr. Chawner little suspected. The great, tramping march of progress was not to be impeded by Mr. Chawner. Mr. Povey began to make his own tickets. At first he suffered as all reformers and inventors suffer. He used the internal surface of collar-boxes and ordinary ink and pens, and the result was such as to give customers the idea that the Baineses were too poor or too mean to buy tickets like other shops. For bought tickets had an ivory-tinted gloss, and the ink was black and glossy, and the edges were very straight and did not show yellow between two layers of white. Whereas Mr. Povey's tickets were of a bluish-white, without gloss; the ink was neither black nor shiny,

and the edges were amateurishly rough: the tickets had an unmistakable air of having been "made out of something else;" moreover, the lettering had not the free, dashing style of Mr. Chawner's tickets.

And did Mrs. Baines encourage him in his single-minded enterprise on behalf of *her* business? Not a bit! Mrs. Baines's attitude, when not disdainful, was inimical! So curious is human nature, so blind is man to his own advantage! Life was very complex for Mr. Povey. It might have been less complex had Bristol board and Chinese ink been less expensive; with these materials he could have achieved marvels to silence all prejudice and stupidity; but they were too costly. Still, he persevered, and Constance morally supported him; he drew his inspiration and his courage from Constance. Instead of the internal surface of collar-boxes, he tried the external surface, which was at any rate shiny. But the ink would not "take" on it. He made as many experiments as Edison was to make, and as many failures. Then Constance was visited by a notion for mixing sugar with ink. Simple, innocent creature—why should providence have chosen her to be the vessel of such a sublime notion? Puzzling enigma, which, however, did not exercise Mr. Povey! He found it quite natural that she should save him. Save him she did. Sugar and ink would "take" on anything, and it shone like a "patent leather" boot. Further, Constance developed a "hand" for lettering which outdid Mr. Povey's. Between them they manufactured tickets by the dozen and by the score—tickets which, while possessing nearly all the smartness and finish of Mr. Chawner's tickets, were much superior to these in originality and strikingness. Constance and Mr. Povey were delighted and fascinated by them. As for Mrs.



Baines, she said little, but the modern spirit was too elated by its success to care whether she said little or much. And every few days Mr. Povey thought of some new and wonderful word to put on a ticket.

His last miracle was the word "exquisite." "Exquisite," pinned on a piece of broad tartan ribbon, appeared to Constance and Mr. Povey as the finality of appropriateness. A climax worthy to close the year! Mr. Povey had cut the card and sketched the word and figures in pencil, and Constance was doing her executive portion of the undertaking. They were very happy, very absorbed, in this strictly business matter. The clock showed five minutes past ten. Stern duty, a pure desire for the prosperity of the shop, had kept them at hard labour since before eight o'clock that morning!

The stairs-door opened, and Mrs. Baines appeared, in bonnet and furs and gloves, all clad for going out. She had abandoned the cocoon of crape, but still wore weeds. She was stouter than ever.

"What!" she cried. "Not ready! Now really!"

"Oh, mother! How you made me jump!" Constance protested. "What time is it? It surely isn't time to go yet!"

"Look at the clock!" said Mrs. Baines, drily.

"Well, I never!" Constance murmured, confused.

"Come, put your things together, and don't keep me waiting," said Mrs. Baines, going past the table to the window, and lifting the blind to peep out. "Still snowing," she observed. "Oh, the band's going away at last! I wonder how they can play at all in this weather. By the way, what was that tune they gave us just now? I couldn't make out whether it was 'Redhead,' or—"

"Band?" questioned Constance—the simpleton!

Neither she nor Mr. Povey had heard the strains of the Bursley Town Silver Prize Band which had been enlivening the season according to its usual custom.

"What's this?" asked Mrs. Baines, bringing her vast form to the table and picking up a ticket.

Mr. Povey said nothing. Constance said: "Mr. Povey thought of it to-day. Don't you think it's very good, mother?"

"I'm afraid I don't," Mrs. Baines coldly replied.

"But why not, mother?"

"It's not suitable, my dear."

She dropped the ticket from her gloved hand. Mr. Povey had darkly flashed. Though he spoke little, he was as sensitive as he was obstinate. On this occasion he said nothing. He expressed his feelings by seizing the ticket and throwing it into the fire.

The situation was extremely delicate. Priceless *employés* like Mr. Povey cannot be treated as machines, and Mrs. Baines of course instantly saw that tact was needed.

"Go along to my bedroom and get ready, my pet," said she to Constance. "Sophia is there. There's a good fire. I must just speak to Maggie." She tactfully left the room.

Mr. Povey glanced at the fire and the curling red remains of the ticket. Trade was bad; owing to weather and war, destitution was abroad; and he had been doing his utmost for the welfare of the shop; and here was the reward!

Constance's eyes were full of tears. "Never mind!" she murmured, and went upstairs.

## II.

In the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel on Duck Bank there was a full and influential congregation. For in those days influential people were not merely content to live in the town where their fathers had lived, without dreaming of country residences and smokeless air—they were content also to believe what their fathers had believed about the beginning and the end of all. There was no such thing as the unknowable in those days. The eternal mysteries were as simple as an addition sum; a child could tell you with absolute certainty where you would be and what you would be doing a million years hence, and exactly what God thought of you. Accordingly, everyone being of the same mind, everyone met on certain occasions in certain places in order to express the universal mind. And in the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel, for example, instead of a sparse handful of persons disturbingly conscious of being in a minority, as now, a magnificent and proud majority had collected, deeply aware of its rightness and its correctness.

And the minister, backed by minor ministers, knelt and covered his face in the superb mahogany rostrum; and behind him, in what was then still called the "orchestra" (though no musical instruments except the grand organ had sounded in it for decades), the choir knelt and covered their faces; and all around, in the richly painted gallery and on the ground-floor, multitudinous rows of people, in easy circumstances of body and soul, knelt in high pews and covered their faces. And there floated before them, in the intense and prolonged silence, the clear vision of Jehovah on a throne, a God of sixty or so with a moustache and a beard, and a non-committal

expression which declined to say whether or not he would require more bloodshed; and this God, destitute of pinions, was surrounded by white-winged creatures that wafted themselves to and fro while chanting; and afar off was an obscene monstrosity, with cloven hoofs and a tail, very dangerous and rude and interfering, who could exist comfortably in the middle of a coal-fire, and who took a malignant and exhaustless pleasure in coaxing you by false pretences into the same fire; but of course you had too much sense to swallow his wicked absurdities. Once a year, for ten minutes by the clock, you knelt thus, in mass, and by meditation convinced yourself that you had too much sense to swallow his wicked absurdities. And the hour was very solemn, the most solemn of all the hours.

Strange that immortal souls should be found with the temerity to reflect upon mundane affairs in that hour! Yet there were undoubtedly such in the congregation; there were perhaps many to whom the vision, if clear, was spasmodic and fleeting. And among them the inhabitants of the Baines family pew! Who would have supposed that Mr. Povey, a recent convert from Primitive Methodism in King Street to Wesleyan Methodism on Duck Bank, was dwelling upon window-tickets and the injustice of women, instead of upon his relations with Jehovah and the tailed one? Who would have supposed that the gentle-eyed Constance, pattern of daughters, was risking her eternal welfare by smiling at the tailed one, who, concealing his tail, had assumed the image of Mr. Povey? Who would have supposed that Mrs. Baines, instead of resolving that Jehovah and not the tailed one should have ultimate rule over her, was resolving that she and not Mr. Povey should have ultimate rule over her house and shop? It was a pew-ful that belied its highly satisfactory ap-

pearance. (And possibly there were other pew-fuls equally deceptive.)

Sophia alone, in the corner next to the wall, with her beautiful stern face pressed convulsively against her hands, was truly busy with immortal things. Turbulent heart, the violence of her spiritual life had made her older! Never was a passionate, proud girl in a harder case than Sophia! In the splendour of her remorse for a fatal forgetfulness, she had renounced that which she loved and thrown herself into that which she loathed. It was her nature so to do. She had done it haughtily, and not with kindness, but she had done it with the whole force of her will. Constance had been compelled to yield up to her the millinery department, for Sophia's fingers had a gift of manipulating ribbons and feathers that was beyond Constance. Sophia had accomplished miracles in the millinery. Yes, and she would be utterly polite to customers; but afterwards, when the customers were gone, let mothers, sisters, and Mr. Poveys beware of her fiery darts!

But why, when nearly three months had elapsed after her father's death, had she spent more and more time in the shop, secretly aflame with expectancy? Why, when one day a strange traveller entered the shop and announced himself the new representative of Birkinshaws—why had her very soul died away within her and an awful sickness seized her? She knew then that she had been her own deceiver. She recognised and admitted, abasing herself lower than the lowest, that her motive in leaving Miss Chetwynd's and joining the shop had been, at the best, very mixed, very impure. Engaged at Miss Chetwynd's, she might easily have never set eyes on Gerald Scales again. Employed in the shop, she could not fail to meet

him. In this light was to be seen the true complexion of the splendour of her remorse. A terrible thought for her! And she could not dismiss it. It contaminated her existence, this thought! And she could confide in no one. She was incapable of showing a wound. Quarter had succeeded quarter, and Gerald Scales was no more heard of. She had sacrificed her life for worse than nothing. She had made her own tragedy. She had killed her father, cheated and shamed herself with a remorse horribly spurious, exchanged content for misery and pride for humiliation—and with it all, Gerald Scales had vanished! She was ruined.

She took to religion, and her conscientious Christian virtues, practised with stern inclemency, were the canker of the family. Thus a year and a half had passed.

And then, on this last day of the year, the second year of her shame and of her heart's widowhood, Mr. Scales had reappeared. She had gone casually into the shop and found him talking to her mother and Mr. Povey. He had come back to the provincial round and to her. She shook his hand and fled, because she could not have stayed. None had noticed her agitation, for she had held her body as in a vice. She knew the reason neither of his absence nor of his return. She knew nothing. And not a word had been said at meals. And the day had gone and the night come; and now she was in chapel, with Constance by her side and Gerald Scales in her soul! Happy beyond previous conception of happiness! Wretched beyond an unutterable woe! And none knew! What was she to pray for? To what purpose and end ought she to steel herself? Ought she to hope, or ought she to despair? "O God, help me!" she kept whispering to Jehovah whenever the heavenly vision shone through

the wrack of her meditation. "O God, help me!" She had a conscience that, when it was in the mood for severity, could be unspeakably cruel to her.

And whenever she looked, with dry, hot eyes, through her gloved fingers, she saw in front of her on the wall a marble tablet inscribed in gilt letters, the cenotaph! She knew all the lines by heart, in their spacious grandiloquence; lines such as:

EVER READY WITH HIS TONGUE HIS PEN AND HIS PURSE  
TO HELP THE CHURCH OF HIS FATHERS  
IN HER HE LIVED AND IN HER HE DIED  
CHERISHING A DEEP AND ARDENT AFFECTION  
FOR HIS BELOVED FAITH AND CREED.

And again:

HIS SYMPATHIES EXTENDED BEYOND HIS OWN COMMUNITY  
HE WAS ALWAYS TO THE FORE IN GOOD WORKS  
AND HE SERVED THE CIRCUIT THE TOWN AND THE DISTRICT  
WITH GREAT ACCEPTANCE AND USEFULNESS.

Thus had Mr. Critchlow's vanity been duly appeased.

As the minutes sped in the breathing silence of the chapel the emotional tension grew tighter; worshippers sighed heavily, or called upon Jehovah for a sign, or merely coughed an invocation. And then at last the clock in the middle of the balcony gave forth the single stroke to which it was limited; the ministers rose, and the congregation after them; and everybody smiled as though it was the millennium, and not simply the new year, that had set in. Then, faintly, through walls and shut windows, came the sound of bells and of steam syrens and whistles. The superintendent minister opened his hymn-book, and

the hymn was sung which had been sung in Wesleyan Chapels on New Year's morn since the era of John Wesley himself. The organ finished with a clangour of all its pipes; the minister had a few last words with Jehovah, and nothing was left to do except to persevere in well-doing. The people leaned towards each other across the high backs of the pews.

"A happy New Year!"

"Eh, thank ye! The same to you!"

"Another Watch Night service over!"

"Eh, yes!" And a sigh.

Then the aisles were suddenly crowded, and there was a good-humoured, optimistic pushing towards the door. In the Corinthian porch occurred a great putting-on of cloaks, ulsters, goloshes, and even pattens, and a great putting-up of umbrellas. And the congregation went out into the whirling snow, dividing into several black, silent-footed processions, down Trafalgar Road, up towards the playground, along the market-place, and across Duck Square in the direction of St. Luke's Square.

Mr. Povey was between Mrs. Baines and Constance.

"You must take my arm, my pet," said Mrs. Baines to Sophia.

Then Mr. Povey and Constance waded on in front through the drifts. Sophia balanced that enormous swaying mass, her mother. Owing to their hoops, she had much difficulty in keeping close to her. Mrs. Baines laughed with the complacent ease of obesity, yet a fall would have been almost irremediable for her; and so Sophia had to laugh too. But, though she laughed, God had not helped her. She did not know where she was going, nor what might happen to her next.

"Why, bless us!" exclaimed Mrs. Baines, as they



turned the corner into King Street. "There's someone sitting on our doorstep!"

There was: a figure swathed in an ulster, a maud over the ulster, and a high hat on the top of all. It could not have been there very long, because it was only speckled with snow. Mr. Povey plunged forward.

"It's Mr. Scales, of all people!" said Mr. Povey.

"Mr. Scales!" cried Mrs. Baines.

And, "Mr. Scales!" murmured Sophia, terribly afraid.

### III.

"Is that you, Mrs. Baines?" asked Gerald Scales, in a half-witted voice, looking up, and then getting to his feet. "Is this your house? So it is! Well, I'd no idea I was sitting on your doorstep."

He smiled timidly, nay, sheepishly, while the women and Mr. Povey surrounded him with their astonished faces under the light of the gas-lamp. Certainly he was very pale.

"But whatever is the matter, Mr. Scales?" Mrs. Baines demanded in an anxious tone. "Are you ill? Have you been suddenly—"

"Oh no," said the young man lightly. "It's nothing. Only I was set on just now, down there,"—he pointed to the depths of King Street.

"Set on!" Mrs. Baines repeated, alarmed.

"That makes the fourth case in a week, that we *know* of!" said Mr. Povey. "It really is becoming a scandal."

The fact was that, owing to depression of trade, lack of employment, and rigorous weather, public security in the Five Towns was at that period not as perfect as it ought to have been. In the stress of hunger the lower classes were forgetting their manners—and this in spite of the altruistic and noble efforts of their social superiors

to relieve the destitution due, of course, to short-sighted improvidence. When (the social superiors were asking in despair) will the lower classes learn to put by for a rainy day? (They might have said a snowy and a frosty day.) It was "really too bad" of the lower classes, when everything that could be done was being done for them, to kill, or even attempt to kill, the goose that lays the golden eggs! And especially in a respectable town! What, indeed, were things coming to? Well, here was Mr. Gerald Scales, gentleman from Manchester, a witness and victim to the deplorable moral condition of the Five Towns. What would he think of the Five Towns. The evil and the danger had been a topic of discussion in the shop for a week past, and now it was brought home to them.

"I hope you weren't—" said Mrs. Baines, apologetically and sympathetically.

"Oh no!" Mr. Scales interrupted her quite gaily. "I managed to beat them off. Only my elbow—"

Meanwhile it was continuing to snow.

"Do come in!" said Mrs. Baines.

"I couldn't think of troubling you," said Mr. Scales. "I'm all right now, and I can find my way to the Tiger."

"You must come in, if it's only for a minute," said Mrs. Baines, with decision. She had to think of the honour of the town.

"You're very kind," said Mr. Scales.

The door was suddenly opened from within, and Maggie surveyed them from the height of the two steps.

"A happy New Year, mum, to all of you."

"Thank you, Maggie," said Mrs. Baines, and primly added: "The same to you!" And in her own mind she said that Maggie could best prove her desire for a happy

new year by contriving in future not to "scamp her corners," and not to break so much crockery.

Sophia, scarce knowing what she did, mounted the steps.

"Mr. Scales ought to let our New Year in, my pet," Mrs. Baines stopped her.

"Oh, of course, mother!" Sophia concurred with a gasp, springing back nervously.

Mr. Scales raised his hat, and duly let the new year, and much snow, into the Baines parlour. And there was a vast deal of stamping of feet, agitating of umbrellas, and shaking of cloaks and ulsters on the doormat in the corner by the harmonium. And Maggie took away an armful of everything snowy, including goloshes, and received instructions to boil milk and to bring "mince." Mr. Povey said "B-r-r-r!" and shut the door (which was bordered with felt to stop ventilation); Mrs. Baines turned up the gas till it sang, and told Sophia to poke the fire, and actually told Constance to light the second gas.

Excitement prevailed.

The placidity of existence had been agreeably disturbed (yes, agreeably, in spite of horror at the attack on Mr. Scales's elbow) by an adventure. Moreover, Mr. Scales proved to be in evening-dress. And nobody had ever worn evening-dress in that house before.

Sophia's blood was in her face, and it remained there, enhancing the vivid richness of her beauty. She was dizzy with a strange and disconcerting intoxication. She seemed to be in a world of unrealities and incredibilities. Her ears heard with indistinctness, and the edges of things and people had a prismatic colouring. She was in a state of ecstatic, unreasonable, inexplicable, happiness. All her misery, doubts, despair, rancour, churlishness, had

disappeared. She was as softly gentle as Constance. Her eyes were the eyes of a fawn, and her gestures delicious in their modest and sensitive grace. Constance was sitting on the sofa, and, after glancing about as if for shelter, she sat down on the sofa by Constance's side. She tried not to stare at Mr. Scales, but her gaze would not leave him. She was sure that he was the most perfect man in the world. A shortish man, perhaps, but a perfect. That such perfection could be was almost past her belief. He excelled all her dreams of the ideal man. His smile, his voice, his hand, his hair—never were such! Why, when he spoke—it was positively music! When he smiled—it was heaven! His smile, to Sophia, was one of those natural phenomena which are so lovely that they make you want to shed tears. There is no hyperbole in this description of Sophia's sensations, but rather an under-statement of them.

"I stayed in the town on purpose to go to a New Year's party at Mr. Lawton's," Mr. Scales was saying.

"Ah! So you know Lawyer Lawton!" observed Mrs. Baines, impressed, for Lawyer Lawton did not consort with tradespeople. He was jolly with them, and he did their legal business for them, but he was not of them. His friends came from afar.

"My people are old acquaintances of his," said Mr. Scales, sipping the milk which Maggie had brought.

"Now, Mr. Scales, you must taste my mince. A happy month for every tart you eat, you know," Mrs. Baines reminded him.

He bowed. "And it was as I was coming away from there that I got into difficulties." He laughed.

Then he recounted the struggle, which had, however, been brief, as the assailants lacked pluck. He had slipped

and fallen on his elbow on the kerb, and his elbow might have been broken, had not the snow been so thick. No, it did not hurt him now; doubtless a mere bruise. It was fortunate that the miscreants had not got the better of him, for he had in his pocket-book a considerable sum of money in notes—accounts paid! He had often thought what an excellent thing it would be if commercials could travel with dogs, particularly in winter. There was nothing like a dog.

"You are fond of dogs?" asked Mr. Povey, who had always had a secret but impracticable ambition to keep a dog.

"Yes," said Mr. Scales, turning now to Mr. Povey.

"Keep one?" asked Mr. Povey, in a sporting tone.

"I have a fox-terrier bitch," said Mr. Scales, "that took a first at Knutsford; but she's getting old now."

The sexual epithet fell queerly on the room. Mr. Povey, being a man of the world, behaved as if nothing had happened; but Mrs. Baines's curls protested against this unnecessary coarseness.

Mr. Povey, fascinated, proceeded in the direction of dogs, and it grew more and more evident that Mr. Scales, who went out to parties in evening dress, instead of going in respectable broad-cloth to watch-night services, who knew the great ones of the land, and who kept dogs of an inconvenient sex, was neither an ordinary commercial traveller nor the kind of man to which the Square was accustomed. He came from a different world.

"Lawyer Lawton's party broke up early—at least I mean, considering—" Mrs. Baines hesitated.

After a pause Mr. Scales replied, "Yes, I left immediately the clock struck twelve. I've a heavy day to-morrow—I mean to-day."

He took his leave with distinguished courtliness.

"If I have a moment I shall run in to-morrow morning just to let you know I'm all right," said he, in the white street.

"Oh, do!" said Constance. Constance's perfect innocence made her strangely forward at times.

"A happy New Year and many of them!"

"Thanks! Same to you! Don't get lost."

"Straight up the Square and first on the right," called the commonsense of Mr. Povey.

Nothing else remained to say, and the visitor disappeared silently in the whirling snow. "Brrr!" murmured Mr. Povey, shutting the door. Everybody felt: "What a funny ending of the old year!"

"Sophia, my pet," Mrs. Baines began.

But Sophia had vanished to bed.

"Tell her about her new night-dress," said Mrs. Baines to Constance.

"Yes, mother."

"I don't know that I'm so set up with that young man, after all," Mrs. Baines reflected aloud.

"Oh, mother!" Constance protested. "I think he's just lovely."

"He never looks you straight in the face," said Mrs. Baines.

"Don't tell *me!*" laughed Constance, kissing her mother good night. "You're only on your high horse because he didn't praise your mince. *I* noticed it."

#### IV.

"If anybody thinks I'm going to stand the cold in this show-room any longer, they're mistaken," said Sophia the

next morning loudly, and in her mother's hearing. And she went down into the shop carrying bonnets.

She pretended to be angry, but she was not. She felt, on the contrary, extremely joyous, and charitable to all the world. Usually she would take pains to keep out of the shop; usually she was preoccupied and stern. Hence her presence on the ground-floor, and her demeanour, excited interest among the three young lady assistants who sat sewing round the stove in the middle of the shop, sheltered by the great pile of shirtings and linseys that fronted the entrance.

Sophia shared Constance's corner. They had hot bricks under their feet, and fine-knitted wraps on their shoulders. They would have been more comfortable near the stove, but greatness has its penalties. The weather was exceptionally severe. The windows were thickly frosted over, so that Mr. Povey's art in dressing them was quite wasted. And—rare phenomenon!—the doors of the shop were shut. In the ordinary way they were not merely open, but hidden by a display of "cheap lines." Mr. Povey, after consulting Mrs. Baines, had decided to close them, foregoing the customary display. Mr. Povey had also, in order to get a little warmth into his limbs, personally assisted two casual labourers to scrape the thick frozen snow off the pavement; and he wore his kid mittens. All these things together proved better than the evidence of barometers how the weather nipped.

Mr. Scales came about ten o'clock. Instead of going to Mr. Povey's counter, he walked boldly to Constance's corner, and looked over the boxes, smiling and saluting. Both the girls candidly delighted in his visit. Both blushed; both laughed—without knowing why they laughed. Mr. Scales said he was just departing and had slipped in

for a moment to thank all of them for their kindness of last night—"or rather this morning." The girls laughed again at this witticism.

Sophia, glancing sidelong, saw an assistant parleying with a customer; and then the assistant came softly behind the counter and approached the corner.

"Miss Constance, can you spare a minute?" the assistant whispered discreetly.

Constance extinguished her smile for Mr. Scales, and, turning away, lighted an entirely different and inferior smile for the customer.

"Good morning, Miss Baines. Very cold, isn't it?"

"Good morning, Mrs. Chatterley. Yes, it is. I suppose you're getting anxious about those—" Constance stopped.

Sophia was now alone with Mr. Scales, for in order to discuss the unnameable freely with Mrs. Chatterley her sister was edging up the counter. Sophia had dreamed of a private conversation as something delicious and impossible. But chance had favoured her. She was alone with him. And his neat fair hair and his blue eyes and his delicate mouth were as wonderful to her as ever. He was gentlemanly to a degree that impressed her more than anything had impressed her in her life. And all the proud and aristocratic instinct that was at the base of her character sprang up and seized on his gentlemanliness like a famished animal seizing on food.

"The last time I saw you," said Mr. Scales, in a new tone, "you said you were never in the shop."

"What? Yesterday? Did I?"

"No, I mean the last time I saw you alone," said he.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "It's just an accident."

"That's exactly what you said last time."



"Is it?"

Was it his manner, or what he said, that flattered her, that intensified her beautiful vivacity?

"I suppose you don't often go out?" he went on.

"What? In this weather?"

"Any time."

"I go to chapel," said she, "and marketing with mother." There was a little pause. "And to the Free Library."

"Oh yes. You've got a Free Library here now, haven't you?"

"Yes. We've had it over a year."

"And you belong to it? What do you read?"

"Oh, stories, you know. I get a fresh book out once a week."

"Saturdays, I suppose?"

"No," she said. "Wednesdays." And she smiled. "Usually."

"It's Wednesday to-day," said he. "Not been already?"

She shook her head. "I don't think I shall go to-day. It's too cold. I don't *think* I shall venture out to-day."

"You must be very fond of reading," said he.

Then Mr. Povey appeared, rubbing his mittened hands. And Mrs. Chatterley went.

"I'll run and fetch mother," said Constance.

Mrs. Baines was very polite to the young man. He related his interview with the police, whose opinion was that he had been attacked by stray members of a gang from Hanbridge.

At half-past one, while Mrs. Baines was dozing after dinner, Sophia wrapped herself up, and with a book under her arm went forth into the world, through the shop. She

returned in less than twenty minutes. But her mother had already awakened, and was hovering about the back of the shop. Mothers have supernatural gifts.

Sophia nonchalantly passed her and hurried into the parlour, where she threw down her muff and a book and knelt before the fire to warm herself.

Mrs. Baines followed her. "Been to the Library?" questioned Mrs. Baines.

"Yes, mother. And it's simply perishing."

"I wonder at your going on a day like to-day. I thought you always went on Thursdays?"

"So I do. But I'd finished my book."

"What is this?" Mrs. Baines picked up the volume, which was covered with black oil-cloth.

"You needn't be afraid," said Sophia, laughing. "It's Miss Sewell's *Experience of Life*."

"A novel, I see," observed Mrs. Baines, dropping the book.

Gold and jewels would probably not tempt a Sophia of these days to read *Experience of Life*; but to Sophia Baines the bland story had the piquancy of the disapproved.

The next day Mrs. Baines summoned Sophia into her bedroom.

"Sophia," said she, trembling, "I shall be glad if you will not walk about the streets with young men until you have my permission."

The girl blushed violently. "I—I—"

"You were seen in Wedgwood Street," said Mrs. Baines.

"Who's been gossiping—Mr. Critchlow, I suppose?" Sophia exclaimed scornfully.

"No one has been 'gossiping,'" said Mrs. Baines.

"Well, if I meet someone by accident in the street I can't help it, can I?" Sophia's voice shook.

"You know what I mean, my child," said Mrs. Baines, with careful calm.

Sophia dashed angrily from the room.

"I like the idea of him having 'a heavy day!'" Mrs. Baines reflected ironically, recalling a phrase which had lodged in her mind. And very vaguely, with an uneasiness scarcely perceptible, she remembered that "he," and no other, had been in the shop on the day her husband died.

## CHAPTER VI.

### ESCAPADE.

#### I.

THE uneasiness of Mrs. Baines flowed and ebbed, during the next three months, influenced by Sophia's moods. There were days when Sophia was the old Sophia—the forbidding, difficult, waspish, and even hedgehog Sophia. But there were other days on which Sophia seemed to be drawing joy and gaiety and goodwill from some secret source, from some fount whose nature and origin none could divine. It was on these days that the uneasiness of Mrs. Baines waxed. She had the wildest suspicions; she was almost capable of accusing Sophia of carrying on a clandestine correspondence; she saw Sophia and Gerald Scales deeply and wickedly in love; she saw them with their arms round each other's necks. . . . And then she called herself a middle-aged fool, to base such a structure of suspicion on a brief encounter in the street and on an idea, a fancy, a curious and irrational notion! Sophia had a certain streak of pure nobility in that exceedingly heterogeneous thing, her character. Moreover, Mrs. Baines watched the posts, and she also watched Sophia—she was not the woman to trust to a streak of pure nobility

—and she came to be sure that Sophia's sinfulness, if any, was not such as could be weighed in a balance, or collected together by stealth and then suddenly placed before the girl on a charger.

Still, she would have given much to see inside Sophia's lovely head. Ah! Could she have done so, what sleep-destroying wonders she would have witnessed! By what bright lamps burning in what mysterious grottoes and caverns of the brain would her mature eyes have been dazzled! Sophia was living for months on the exhaustless ardent vitality absorbed during a magical two minutes in Wedgwood Street. She was living chiefly on the flaming fire struck in her soul by the shock of seeing Gerald Scales in the porch of the Wedgwood Institution as she came out of the Free Library with *Experience of Life* tucked into her large astrakhan muff. He had stayed to meet her, then: she knew it! "After all," her heart said, "I must be very beautiful, for I have attracted the pearl of men!" And she remembered her face in the glass. The value and the power of beauty were tremendously proved to her. He, the great man of the world, the handsome and elegant man with a thousand strange friends and a thousand interests far remote from her, had remained in Bursley on the mere chance of meeting her! She was proud, but her pride was drowned in bliss. "I was just looking at this inscription about Mr. Gladstone." "So you decided to come out as usual!" "And may I ask what book you have chosen?" These were the phrases she heard, and to which she responded with similar phrases. And meanwhile a miracle of ecstasy had opened—opened like a flower. She was walking along Wedgwood Street by his side, slowly, on the scraped pavements, where marble bulbs of snow had defied the spade and remained. She

and he were exactly of the same height, and she kept looking into his face and he into hers. This was all the miracle. Except that she was not walking on the pavement—she was walking on the intangible sward of paradise! Except that the houses had receded and faded, and the passers-by were subtilised into unnoticeable ghosts! Except that her mother and Constance had become phantasmal beings existing at an immense distance!

What had happened? Nothing! The most commonplace occurrence! The eternal cause had picked up a commercial traveller (it might have been a clerk or curate, but it in fact was a commercial traveller), and endowed him with all the glorious, unique, incredible attributes of a god, and planted him down before Sophia in order to produce the eternal effect. A miracle performed specially for Sophia's benefit! No one else in Wedgwood Street saw the god walking along by her side. No one else saw anything but a simple commercial traveller. Yes, the most commonplace occurrence!

Of course at the corner of the street he had to go. "Till next time!" he murmured. And fire came out of his eyes and lighted in Sophia's lovely head those lamps which Mrs. Baines was mercifully spared from seeing. And he had shaken hands and raised his hat. Imagine a god raising his hat! And he went off on two legs, precisely like a dashing little commercial traveller.

And, escorted by the equivocal Angel of Eclipses, she had turned into King Street, and arranged her face, and courageously met her mother. Her mother had not at first perceived the unusual; for mothers, despite their reputation to the contrary, really are the blindest creatures. Sophia, the naïve ninny, had actually supposed that her walking along a hundred yards of pavement with a god

by her side was not going to excite remark! What a delusion! It is true, certainly, that no one saw the god by direct vision. But Sophia's cheeks, Sophia's eyes, the curve of Sophia's neck as her soul yearned towards the soul of the god—these phenomena were immeasurably more notable than Sophia guessed. An account of them, in a modified form to respect Mrs. Baines's notorious dignity, had healed the mother of her blindness and led to that characteristic protest from her, "I shall be glad if you will not walk about the streets with young men," etc.

When the period came for the reappearance of Mr. Scales, Mrs. Baines outlined a plan, and when the circular announcing the exact time of his arrival was dropped into the letter-box, she formulated the plan in detail. In the first place, she was determined to be indisposed and invisible herself, so that Mr. Scales might be foiled in any possible design to renew social relations in the parlour. In the second place, she flattered Constance with a single hint—oh, the vaguest and briefest!—and Constance understood that she was not to quit the shop on the appointed morning. In the third place, she invented a way of explaining to Mr. Povey that the approaching advent of Gerald Scales must not be mentioned. And in the fourth place, she deliberately made appointments for Sophia with two millinery customers in the show-room, so that Sophia might be imprisoned in the show-room.

Having thus left nothing to chance, she told herself that she was a foolish woman full of nonsense. But this did not prevent her from putting her lips together firmly and resolving that Mr. Scales should have no finger in the pie of *her* family. She had acquired information concerning Mr. Scales, at second-hand, from Lawyer Pratt. More than this, she posed the question in a broader form

—why should a young girl be permitted any interest in any young man whatsoever? The everlasting purpose had made use of Mrs. Baines and cast her off, and, like most persons in a similar situation, she was, unconsciously and quite honestly, at odds with the everlasting purpose.

## II.

On the day of Mr. Scales's visit to the shop to obtain orders and money on behalf of Birkinshaws, a singular success seemed to attend the machinations of Mrs. Baines. With Mr. Scales punctuality was not an inveterate habit, and he had rarely been known, in the past, to fulfil exactly the prophecy of the letter of advice concerning his arrival. But that morning his promptitude was unexampled. He entered the shop and by chance Mr. Povey was arranging unshrinkable flannels in the doorway. The two youngish little men talked amiably about flannels, dogs, and quarter-day (which was just past), and then Mr. Povey led Mr. Scales to his desk in the dark corner behind the high pile of twills, and paid the quarterly bill, in notes and gold—as always; and then Mr. Scales offered for the august inspection of Mr. Povey all that Manchester had recently invented for the temptation of drapers, and Mr. Povey gave him an order which, if not reckless, was nearer “handsome” than “good.” During the process Mr. Scales had to go out of the shop twice or three times in order to bring in from his barrow at the kerbstone certain small black boxes edged with brass. On none of these excursions did Mr. Scales glance wantonly about him in satisfaction of the lust of the eye. Even if he had permitted himself this freedom he would have seen nothing more interesting than three young lady assistants seated round the stove and sewing with pricked

fingers from which the chilblains were at last deciding to depart. When Mr. Scales had finished writing down the details of the order with his ivory-handled stylo, and re-packed his boxes, he drew the interview to a conclusion after the manner of a capable commercial traveller; that is to say, he implanted in Mr. Povey his opinion that Mr. Povey was a wise, a shrewd and an upright man, and that the world would be all the better for a few more like him. He inquired for Mrs. Baines, and was deeply pained to hear of her indisposition, while finding consolation in the assurance that the Misses Baines were well. Mr. Povey was on the point of accompanying the pattern of commercial travellers to the door, when two customers simultaneously came in—ladies. One made straight for Mr. Povey, whereupon Mr. Scales parted from him at once, it being a universal maxim in shops that even the most distinguished commercial shall not hinder the business of even the least distinguished customer. The other customer had the effect of causing Constance to pop up from her cloistral corner. Constance had been there all the time, but of course, though she heard the remembered voice, her maidenliness had not permitted that she should show herself to Mr. Scales.

Now, as he was leaving, Mr. Scales saw her, with her agreeable snub-nose and her kind, simple eyes. She was requesting the second customer to mount to the show-room, where was Miss Sophia. Mr. Scales hesitated a moment, and in that moment Constance, catching his eye, smiled upon him, and nodded. What else could she do? Vaguely aware though she was that her mother was not "set up" with Mr. Scales, and even feared the possible influence of the young man on Sophia, she could not exclude him from her general benevolence towards



the universe. Moreover, she liked him; she liked him very much and thought him a very fine specimen of a man.

He left the door and went across to her. They shook hands and opened a conversation instantly; for Constance, while retaining all her modesty, had lost all her shyness in the shop, and could chatter with anybody. She sidled towards her corner, precisely as Sophia had done on another occasion, and Mr. Scales put his chin over the screening boxes, and eagerly prosecuted the conversation.

There was absolutely nothing in the fact of the interview itself to cause alarm to a mother, nothing to render futile the precautions of Mrs. Baines on behalf of the flower of Sophia's innocence. And yet it held danger for Mrs. Baines, all unconscious in her parlour. Mrs. Baines could rely utterly on Constance not to be led away by the dandiacal charms of Mr. Scales (she knew in what quarter sat the wind for Constance); in her plan she had forgotten nothing, except Mr. Povey; and it must be said that she could not possibly have foreseen the effect on the situation of Mr. Povey's character.

Mr. Povey, attending to his customer, had noticed the bright smile of Constance on the traveller, and his heart did not like it. And when he saw the lively gestures of a Mr. Scales in apparently intimate talk with a Constance hidden behind boxes, his uneasiness grew into fury. He was a man capable of black and terrible furies. Outwardly insignificant, possessing a mind as little as his body, easily abashed, he was none the less a very susceptible young man, soon offended, proud, vain, and obscurely passionate. You might offend Mr. Povey without guessing it, and only discover your sin when Mr. Povey had done something too decisive as a result of it.

The reason of his fury was jealousy. Mr. Povey had

made great advances since the death of John Baines. He had consolidated his position, and he was in every way a personage of the first importance. His misfortune was that he could never translate his importance, or his sense of his importance, into terms of outward demeanour. Most people, had they been told that Mr. Povey was seriously aspiring to enter the Baines family, would have laughed. But they would have been wrong. To laugh at Mr. Povey was invariably wrong. Only Constance knew what inroads he had effected upon her.

The customer went, but Mr. Scales did not go. Mr. Povey, free to reconnoitre, did so. From the shadow of the till he could catch glimpses of Constance's blushing, vivacious face. She was obviously absorbed in Mr. Scales. She and he had a tremendous air of intimacy. And the murmur of their chatter continued. Their chatter was nothing, and about nothing, but Mr. Povey imagined that they were exchanging eternal vows. He endured Mr. Scales's odious freedom until it became insufferable, until it deprived him of all his self-control; and then he retired into his cutting-out room. He meditated there in a condition of insanity for perhaps a minute, and excogitated a device. Dashing back into the shop, he spoke up, half across the shop, in a loud, curt tone:

"Miss Baines, your mother wants you at once."

He was launched on the phrase before he noticed that, during his absence, Sophia had descended from the show-room and joined her sister and Mr. Scales. The danger and scandal were now less, he perceived, but he was glad he had summoned Constance away, and he was in a state to despise consequences.

The three chatterers, startled, looked at Mr. Povey,

who left the shop abruptly. Constance could do nothing but obey the call.

She met him at the door of the cutting-out room in the passage leading to the parlour.

"Where is mother? In the parlour?" Constance inquired innocently.

There was a dark flush on Mr. Povey's face. "If you wish to know," said he in a hard voice, "she hasn't asked for you and she doesn't want you."

He turned his back on her, and retreated into his lair.

"Then what—?" she began, puzzled.

He fronted her. "Haven't you been gabbling long enough with that jackanapes?" he spat at her. There were tears in his eyes.

Constance, though without experience in these matters, comprehended. She comprehended perfectly and immediately. She ought to have put Mr. Povey into his place. She ought to have protested with firm, dignified finality against such a ridiculous and monstrous outrage as that which Mr. Povey had committed. Mr. Povey ought to have been ruined for ever in her esteem and in her heart. But she hesitated.

"And only last Sunday afternoon—" Mr. Povey blubbered.

(Not that anything overt had occurred, or been articulately said, between them last Sunday afternoon. But they had been alone together, and had each witnessed strange and disturbing matters in the eyes of the other.)

Tears now fell suddenly from Constance's eyes. "You ought to be ashamed—" she stammered.

Still, the tears were in her eyes, and in his too. What he or she merely said, therefore, was of secondary importance.

Mrs. Baines, coming from the kitchen, and hearing Constance's voice, burst upon the scene, which silenced her. Parents are sometimes silenced. She found Sophia and Mr. Scales in the shop.

III.

That afternoon Sophia, too busy with her own affairs to notice anything abnormal in the relations between her mother and Constance, and quite ignorant that there had been an unsuccessful plot against her, went forth to call upon Miss Chetwynd, with whom she had remained very friendly: she considered that she and Miss Chetwynd formed an aristocracy of intellect, and the family indeed tacitly admitted this. She practised no secrecy in her departure from the shop; she merely dressed, in her second-best hoop, and went, having been ready at any moment to tell her mother, if her mother caught her and inquired, that she was going to see Miss Chetwynd. And she did go to see Miss Chetwynd, arriving at the house-school, which lay amid trees on the road to Turnhill, just beyond the turnpike, at precisely a quarter-past four. As Miss Chetwynd's pupils left at four o'clock, and as Miss Chetwynd invariably took a walk immediately afterwards, Sophia was able to contain her surprise upon being informed that Miss Chetwynd was not in. She had not intended that Miss Chetwynd should be in.

She turned off to the right, up the side road which, starting from the turnpike, led in the direction of Moor-thorne and Red Cow, two mining villages. Her heart beat with fear as she began to follow that road, for she was upon a terrific adventure. What most frightened her, perhaps, was her own astounding audacity. She was alarmed by something within herself which seemed to be

no part of herself and which produced in her curious, disconcerting, fleeting impressions of unreality.

In the morning she had heard the voice of Mr. Scales from the show-room—that voice whose even distant murmur caused creepings of the skin in her back. And she had actually stood on the counter in front of the window in order to see down perpendicularly into the Square; by so doing she had had a glimpse of the top of his luggage on a barrow, and of the crown of his hat occasionally when he went outside to tempt Mr. Povey. She might have gone down into the shop—there was no slightest reason why she should not; three months had elapsed since the name of Mr. Scales had been mentioned, and her mother had evidently forgotten the trifling incident of New Year's Day—but she was incapable of descending the stairs! She went to the head of the stairs and peeped through the balustrade—and she could not get further. For nearly a hundred days those extraordinary lamps had been brightly burning in her head; and now the light-giver had come again, and her feet would not move to the meeting; now the moment had arrived for which alone she had lived, and she could not seize it as it passed! “Why don't I go downstairs?” she asked herself. “Am I afraid to meet him?”

The customer sent up by Constance had occupied the surface of her life for ten minutes, trying on hats; and during this time she was praying wildly that Mr. Scales might not go, and asserting that it was impossible he should go without at least asking for her. Had she not counted the days to this day? When the customer left Sophia followed her downstairs, and saw Mr. Scales chatting with Constance. All her self-possession instantly returned to her, and she joined them with a rather mock-

ing smile. After Mr. Povey's strange summons had withdrawn Constance from the corner, Mr. Scales's tone had changed; it had thrilled her. "You are *you*," it had said, "there is you—and there is the rest of the universe!" Then he had not forgotten; she had lived in his heart; she had not for three months been the victim of her own fancies! . . . She saw him put a piece of folded white paper on the top edge of the screening box and flick it down to her. She blushed scarlet, staring at it as it lay on the counter. He said nothing, and she could not speak. . . . He had prepared that paper, then, beforehand, on the chance of being able to give it to her! This thought was exquisite but full of terror. "I must really go," he had said, lamely, with emotion in his voice, and he had gone—like that! And she put the piece of paper into the pocket of her apron, and hastened away. She had not even seen, as she turned up the stairs, her mother standing by the till—that spot which was the conning-tower of the whole shop. She ran, ran, breathless to the bedroom. . . .

"I am a wicked girl!" she said quite frankly, on the road to the *rendezvous*. "It is a dream that I am going to meet him. It cannot be true. There is time to go back. If I go back I am safe. I have simply called at Miss Chetwynd's and she wasn't in, and no one can say a word. But if I go on—if I'm seen! What a fool I am to go on!"

And she went on, impelled by, amongst other things, an immense, naïve curiosity, and the vanity which the bare fact of his note had excited. The Loop railway was being constructed at that period, and hundreds of navvies were at work on it between Bursley and Turnhill. When

she came to the new bridge over the cutting, he was there, as he had written that he would be.

They were very nervous, they greeted each other stiffly and as though they had met then for the first time that day. Nothing was said about his note, nor about her response to it. Her presence was treated by both of them as a basic fact of the situation which it would be well not to disturb by comment. Sophia could not hide her shame, but her shame only aggravated the stinging charm of her beauty. She was wearing a hard Amazonian hat, with a lifted veil, the final word of fashion that spring in the Five Towns; her face, beaten by the fresh breeze, shone rosily; her eyes glittered under the dark hat, and the violent colours of her Victorian frock—green and crimson—could not spoil those cheeks. If she looked earthwards, frowning, she was the more adorable so. He had come down the clayey incline from the unfinished red bridge to welcome her, and when the salutations were over they stood still, he gazing apparently at the horizon and she at the yellow marl round the edges of his boots. The encounter was as far away from Sophia's ideal conception as Manchester from Venice.

"So this is the new railway!" said she.

"Yes," said he. "This is your new railway. You can see it better from the bridge."

"But it's very sludgy up there," she objected with a pout.

"Further on it's quite dry," he reassured her.

From the bridge they had a sudden view of a raw gash in the earth; and hundreds of men were crawling about in it, busy with minute operations, like flies in a great wound. There was a continuous rattle of picks, resembling a muffled shower of hail, and in the distance a tiny locomotive was leading a procession of tiny waggons.

"And those are the navvies!" she murmured.

They turned away, up the gradual slope. Sophia knew no longer what she was doing. For some minutes she was as helpless as though she had been in a balloon with him.

"I got my work done early," he said; and added complacently, "As a matter of fact I've had a pretty good day."

She was reassured to learn that he was not neglecting his duties. To be philandering with a commercial traveller who has finished a good day's work seemed less shocking than dalliance with a neglecter of business; it seemed indeed, by comparison, respectable.

"It must be very interesting," she said primly.

"What, my trade?"

"Yes. Always seeing new places and so on."

"In a way it is," he admitted judicially. "But I can tell you it was much more agreeable being in Paris."

"Oh! Have you been to Paris?"

"Lived there for nearly two years," he said carelessly. Then, looking at her, "Didn't you notice I never came for a long time?"

"I didn't know you were in Paris," she evaded him.

"I went to start a sort of agency for Birkinshaws," he said.

"I suppose you talk French like anything."

"Of course one has to talk French," said he. "I learnt French when I was a child from a governess—my uncle made me—but I forgot most of it at school, and at the Varsity you never learn anything—precious little, anyhow! Certainly not French!"

She was deeply impressed. He was a much greater personage than she had guessed. It had never occurred to her that commercial travellers had to go to a university



to finish their complex education. And then, Paris! Paris meant absolutely nothing to her but pure, impossible, unattainable romance. And he had been there! The clouds of glory were around him. He was a hero, dazzling. He had come to her out of another world. He was her miracle. He was almost too miraculous to be true.

She, living her humdrum life at the shop! And he, elegant, brilliant, coming from far cities! They together, side by side, strolling up the road towards the Moorthorne ridge! There was nothing quite like this in the stories of Miss Sewell.

"Your uncle . . .?" she questioned vaguely.

"Yes, Mr. Boldero. He's a partner in Birkinshaws."

"Oh!"

"You've heard of him? He's a great Wesleyan."

"Oh yes," she said. "When we had the Wesleyan Conference here, he—"

"He's always very great at Conferences," said Gerald Scales.

"I didn't know he had anything to do with Birkinshaws."

"He isn't a working partner of course," Mr. Scales explained. "But he means me to be one. I have to learn the business from the bottom. So now you understand why I'm a traveller."

"I see," she said, still more deeply impressed.

"I'm an orphan," said Gerald. "And Uncle Boldero took me in hand when I was three."

"I see!" she repeated.

It seemed strange to her that Mr. Scales should be a Wesleyan—just like herself. She would have been sure that he was "Church." Her notions of Wesleyanism, with her notions of various other things, were sharply modified.

"Now tell me about you," Mr. Scales suggested.

"Oh! I'm nothing!" she burst out.

The exclamation was perfectly sincere. Mr. Scales's disclosures concerning himself, while they excited her, discouraged her.

"You're the finest girl I've ever met, anyhow," said Mr. Scales with gallant emphasis, and he dug his stick into the soft ground.

She blushed and made no answer.

They walked on in silence, each wondering apprehensively what might happen next.

Suddenly Mr. Scales stopped at a dilapidated low brick wall, built in a circle, close to the side of the road.

"I expect that's an old pit-shaft," said he.

"Yes, I expect it is."

He picked up a rather large stone and approached the wall.

"Be careful!" she enjoined him.

"Oh! It's all right," he said lightly. "Let's listen. Come near and listen."

She reluctantly obeyed, and he threw the stone over the dirty ruined wall, the top of which was about level with his hat. For two or three seconds there was no sound. Then a faint reverberation echoed from the depths of the shaft. And on Sophia's brain arose dreadful images of the ghosts of miners wandering for ever in subterranean passages, far, far beneath. The noise of the falling stone had awakened for her the secret terrors of the earth. She could scarcely even look at the wall without a spasm of fear.

"How strange," said Mr. Scales, a little awe in his voice, too, "that that should be left there like that! I suppose it's very deep."

"Some of them are," she trembled.

"I must just have a look," he said, and put his hands on the top of the wall.

"Come away!" she cried.

"Oh! It's all right!" he said again, soothingly. "The wall's as firm as a rock." And he took a slight spring and looked over.

She shrieked loudly. She saw him at the distant bottom of the shaft, mangled, drowning. The ground seemed to quake under her feet. A horrible sickness seized her. And she shrieked again. Never had she guessed that existence could be such pain.

He slid down from the wall, and turned to her. "No bottom to be seen!" he said. Then, observing her transformed face, he came close to her, with a superior masculine smile. "Silly little thing!" he said coaxingly, encouragingly, putting forth all his power to charm.

He perceived at once that he had miscalculated the effects of his action. Her alarm changed swiftly to angry offence. She drew back with a haughty gesture, as if he had intended actually to touch her. Did he suppose, because she chanced to be walking with him, that he had the right to address her familiarly, to tease her, to call her "silly little thing" and to put his face against hers? She resented his freedom with quick and passionate indignation.

She showed him her proud back and nodding head and wrathful skirts; and hurried off without a word, almost running. As for him, he was so startled by unexpected phenomena that he did nothing for a moment—merely stood looking and feeling foolish.

Then she heard him in pursuit. She was too proud to stop or even to reduce her speed.

"I didn't mean to—" he muttered behind her.

No recognition from her.

"I suppose I ought to apologise," he said.

"I should just think you ought," she answered, furious.

"Well, I do!" said he. "Do stop a minute."

"I'll thank you not to follow me, Mr. Scales." She paused, and scorched him with her displeasure. Then she went forward. And her heart was in torture because it could not persuade her to remain with him, and smile and forgive, and win his smile.

"I shall write to you," he shouted down the slope.

She kept on, the ridiculous child. But the agony she had suffered as he clung to the frail wall was not ridiculous, nor her dark vision of the mine, nor her tremendous indignation when, after disobeying her, he forgot that she was a queen. To her the scene was sublimely tragic. Soon she had recrossed the bridge, but not the same she! So this was the end of the incredible adventure!

When she reached the turnpike she thought of her mother and of Constance. She had completely forgotten them; for a space they had utterly ceased to exist for her.

#### IV.

"You've been out, Sophia?" said Mrs. Baines in the parlour, questioningly. Sophia had taken off her hat and mantle hurriedly in the cutting-out room, for she was in danger of being late for tea; but her hair and face showed traces of the March breeze. Mrs. Baines, whose stoutness seemed to increase, sat in the rocking-chair with a number of *The Sunday at Home* in her hand. Tea was set.

"Yes, mother. I called to see Miss Chetwynd."

"I wish you'd tell me when you are going out."

"I looked all over for you before I started."

"No, you didn't, for I haven't stirred from this room

since four o'clock. . . . You should not say things like that," Mrs. Baines added in a gentler tone.

Mrs. Baines had suffered much that day. She knew that she was in an irritable, nervous state, and therefore she said to herself, in her quality of wise woman, "I must watch myself. I mustn't let myself go." And she thought how reasonable she was. She did not guess that all her gestures betrayed her; nor did it occur to her that few things are more galling than the spectacle of a person, actuated by lofty motives, obviously trying to be kind and patient under what he considers to be extreme provocation.

Maggie blundered up the kitchen stairs with the teapot and hot toast; and so Sophia had an excuse for silence. Sophia too had suffered much, suffered excruciatingly; she carried at that moment a whole tragedy in her young soul, unaccustomed to such burdens. Her attitude towards her mother was half fearful and half defiant; it might be summed up in the phrase which she had repeated again and again under her breath on the way home, "Well, mother can't kill me!"

Mrs. Baines put down the blue-covered magazine and twisted her rocking-chair towards the table.

"You can pour out the tea," said Mrs. Baines.

"Where's Constance?"

"She's not very well. She's lying down."

"Anything the matter with her?"

"No."

This was inaccurate. Nearly everything was the matter with Constance, who had never been less Constance than during that afternoon. But Mrs. Baines had no intention of discussing Constance's love-affairs with Sophia. The less said to Sophia about love, the better! Sophia was excitable enough already!

"And what has Miss Chetwynd got to say?" Mrs. Baines inquired.

"She wasn't in."

Mrs. Baines was determined to be calm and careful.

"Oh! What time did you call?"

"I don't know. About half-past four." Sophia finished her tea quickly, and rose. "Shall I tell Mr. Povey he can come?"

(Mr. Povey had his tea after the ladies of the house.)

"Yes, if you will stay in the shop till I come. Light me the gas before you go."

Sophia took a wax taper from a vase on the mantelpiece, stuck it in the fire and lit the gas, which exploded in its crystal cloister with a mild report.

"What's all that clay on your boots, child?" asked Mrs. Baines.

"Clay?" repeated Sophia, staring foolishly at her boots.

"Yes," said Mrs. Baines. "It looks like marl. Where on earth have you been?"

She interrogated her daughter with an upward gaze, frigid and unconsciously hostile, through her gold-rimmed glasses.

"I must have picked it up on the roads," said Sophia, and hastened to the door.

"Sophia!"

"Yes, mother."

"Shut the door."

Sophia unwillingly shut the door which she had half opened.

"Come here."

Sophia obeyed, with falling lip.

"You are deceiving me, Sophia," said Mrs. Baines,

with fierce solemnity. "Where have you been this afternoon?"

Sophia's foot was restless on the carpet behind the table. "I haven't been anywhere," she muttered glumly.

"Have you seen young Scales?"

"Yes," said Sophia with grimness, glancing audaciously for an instant at her mother. ("She can't kill me. She can't kill me," her heart muttered. And she had youth and beauty in her favour, while her mother was only a fat middle-aged woman. "She can't kill me," said her heart, with the trembling, cruel insolence of the mirror-flattered child.)

"How came you to meet him?"

No answer.

"Sophia, you heard what I said!"

Still no answer. Sophia looked down at the table. ("She can't kill me.")

"If you are going to be sullen, I shall have to suppose the worst," said Mrs. Baines.

Sophia kept her silence.

"Of course," Mrs. Baines resumed, "if you choose to be wicked, neither your mother nor anyone else can stop you. There are certain things I *can* do, and these I *shall* do. . . . Let me warn you that young Scales is a thoroughly bad lot. I know all about him. He has been living a wild life abroad, and if it hadn't been that his uncle is a partner in Birkinshaws, they would never have taken him on again." A pause. "I hope that one day you will be a happy wife, but you are much too young yet to be meeting young men, and nothing would ever induce me to let you have anything to do with this Scales. I won't have it. In future you are not to go out alone. You understand me?"

Sophia kept silence.

"I hope you will be in a better frame of mind to-morrow. I can only hope so. But if you aren't, I shall take very severe measures. You think you can defy me. But you never were more mistaken in your life. I don't want to see any more of you now. Go and tell Mr. Povey; and call Maggie for the fresh tea. You make me almost glad that your father died even as he did. He has, at any rate, been spared this."

Those words "died even as he did," achieved the intimidation of Sophia. They seemed to indicate that Mrs. Baines, though she had magnanimously never mentioned the subject to Sophia, knew exactly how the old man had died. Sophia escaped from the room in fear, cowed. Nevertheless, her thought was, "She hasn't killed me. I made up my mind I wouldn't talk, and I didn't."

## CHAPTER VII.

### A DEFEAT.

#### I.

It was during the month of June that Aunt Harriet came over from Axe to spend a few days with her little sister, Mrs. Baines. The railway between Axe and the Five Towns had not yet been opened; but even if it had been opened Aunt Harriet would probably not have used it. She had always travelled from Axe to Bursley in the same vehicle, a small waggonette which she hired from Bratt's livery stables at Axe, driven by a coachman who thoroughly understood the importance, and the peculiarities, of Aunt Harriet.

Mrs. Baines had increased in stoutness, so that now Aunt Harriet had very little advantage over her, phy-



sically. But the moral ascendancy of the elder still persisted. The two vast widows shared Mrs. Baines's bedroom, spending much of their time there in long, hushed conversations—interviews from which Mrs. Baines emerged with the air of one who has received enlightenment and Aunt Harriet with the air of one who has rendered it. The pair went about together, in the shop, the show-room, the parlour, the kitchen, and also into the town, addressing each other as "Sister," "Sister." Everywhere it was "sister," "sister," "my sister," "your dear mother," "your Aunt Harriet." They referred to each other as oracular sources of wisdom and good taste. Respectability stalked abroad when they were afoot. The whole Square wriggled uneasily as though God's eye were peculiarly upon it. The meals in the parlour became solemn collations, at which shone the best silver and the finest diaper, but from which gaiety and naturalness seemed to be banished.

Mr. Povey was not the man to be easily flattened by ponderosity of any kind, and his suppression was a striking proof of the prowess of the widows; who, indeed, went over Mr. Povey like traction-engines, with the sublime unconsciousness of traction-engines, leaving an inanimate object in the road behind them, and scarce aware even of the jolt. Mr. Povey hated Aunt Harriet, but, lying crushed there in the road, how could he rebel? He felt all the time that Aunt Harriet was adding him up, and reporting the result at frequent intervals to Mrs. Baines in the bedroom. Constance, the dear Constance, was also looked at askance. There was nothing in Aunt Harriet's demeanour to her that you could take hold of, but there was emphatically something that you could not take hold of—a hint, an inkling, that insinuated to Con-

stance, "Have a care, lest peradventure you become the second cousin of the scarlet woman."

Sophia was petted. Sophia was liable to be playfully tapped by Aunt Harriet's thimble when Aunt Harriet was hemming dusters (for the elderly lady could lift a duster to her own dignity). Sophia was called on two separate occasions, "My little butterfly." And Sophia was entrusted with the trimming of Aunt Harriet's new summer bonnet. Aunt Harriet deemed that Sophia was looking pale. As the days passed, Sophia's pallor was emphasised by Aunt Harriet until it developed into an article of faith, to which you were compelled to subscribe on pain of excommunication. Then dawned the day when Aunt Harriet said, staring at Sophia as an affectionate aunt may: "That child would do with a change." And then there dawned another day when Aunt Harriet, staring at Sophia compassionately, as a devoted aunt may, said: "It's a pity that child can't have a change." And Mrs. Baines also stared and said: "It is."

And on another day Aunt Harriet said: "I've been wondering whether my little Sophia would care to come and keep her old aunt company awhile."

Impossible to bear up against the momentum of a massive body like Aunt Harriet's! It was irresistible.

The day of departure came, throwing the entire household into a commotion. Dinner was put a quarter of an hour earlier than usual so that Aunt Harriet might achieve Axe at her accustomed hour of tea. After dinner Maggie was the recipient of three amazing muslin aprons, given with a regal gesture. And trunk and box were brought down, and there was a slight odour of black kid gloves in the parlour. The waggonette was due and the waggonette appeared ("I can always rely upon Bladen!" said Aunt

Harriet), and the door was opened, and Bladen, stiff on his legs, descended from the box and touched his hat to Aunt Harriet as she filled up the doorway.

"Have you baited, Bladen?" asked she.

"Yes'm," said he, assuringly.

Bladen and Mr. Povey carried out the trunk and the box, and Constance charged herself with parcels which she bestowed in the corners of the vehicle according to her aunt's prescription; it was like stowing the cargo of a vessel.

"Now, Sophia, my chuck!" Mrs. Baines called up the stairs. And Sophia came slowly downstairs. Mrs. Baines offered her mouth. Sophia glanced at her.

"You needn't think I don't see why you're sending me away!" exclaimed Sophia in a hard, furious voice, with glistening eyes. "I'm not so blind as all that!" She kissed her mother—nothing but a contemptuous peck. Then, as she turned away she added: "But you let Constance do just as she likes!"

This was her sole bitter comment on the episode, but into it she put all the profound bitterness accumulated during many mutinous nights.

As, with due formalities, the equipage drove off, Mrs. Baines gave a sigh of relief. The sisters had won. She could now await the imminent next advent of Mr. Gerald Scales with tranquillity.

## II.

Those singular words of Sophia's, "But you let Constance do just as she likes," had disturbed Mrs. Baines more than was at first apparent. They worried her like a late fly in autumn. For she had said nothing to anyone about Constance's case, Mrs. Maddack of course ex-

cepted. She had instinctively felt that she could not show the slightest leniency towards the romantic impulses of her elder daughter without seeming unjust to the younger, and she had acted accordingly. On the memorable morn of Mr. Povey's acute jealousy, she had, temporarily at any rate, slaked the fire, banked it down, and hidden it; and since then no word had passed as to the state of Constance's heart. In the great peril to be feared from Mr. Scales, Constance's heart had been put aside as a thing that could wait; so one puts aside the mending of linen when earthquake shocks are about. Mrs. Baines was sure that Constance had not chattered to Sophia concerning Mr. Povey. Constance, who understood her mother, had too much commonsense and too nice a sense of propriety to do that—and yet here was Sophia exclaiming, "But you let Constance do just as she likes." Were the relations between Constance and Mr. Povey, then, common property? Did the young lady assistants discuss them?

On the very first Sunday after Sophia's departure, Mr. Povey did not go to chapel in the morning, and he offered no reason for his unusual conduct. He ate his breakfast with appetite, but there was something peculiar in his glance that made Mrs. Baines a little uneasy; this something she could not seize upon and define. When she and Constance returned from chapel Mr. Povey was playing "Rock of Ages" on the harmonium—again unusual! The serious part of the dinner comprised roast-beef and Yorkshire pudding—the pudding being served as a sweet course before the meat. Mrs. Baines ate freely of these things, for she loved them, and she was always hungry after a sermon. She also did well with the Cheshire cheese. Her intention was to sleep in the drawing-room after the repast,

Constance said grace after meat, and the formula on this particular occasion ran thus—

"Thank God for our good dinner, Amen.—Mother, I must just run upstairs to my room." ("My room"—Sophia being far away.)

And off she ran, strangely girlish.

"Well, child, you needn't be in such a hurry," said Mrs. Baines, ringing the bell and rising.

"I should like to have a word with you, if it's all the same to you, Mrs. Baines," said Mr. Povey suddenly, with obvious nervousness. And his tone struck a rude unexpected blow at Mrs. Baines's peace of mind. It was a portentous tone.

"What about?" asked she, with an inflection subtly to remind Mr. Povey what day it was.

"About Constance," said the astonishing man.

"Constance!" exclaimed Mrs. Baines with a histrionic air of bewilderment. And then there was an interruption by Maggie, who came to clear the table.

"What is it, Mr. Povey?" asked Mrs. Baines, when Maggie had gone.

"Oh!" said Mr. Povey, facing her with absurd nervous brusqueness, as though pretending: "Ah, yes! We have something to say—I was forgetting!" Then he began: "It's about Constance and me."

Yes, they had evidently plotted this interview. Constance had evidently taken herself off on purpose to leave Mr. Povey unhampered. They were in league. The inevitable had come. No sleep! No repose! Nothing but worry once more!

"I'm not at all satisfied with the present situation," said Mr. Povey, in a tone that corresponded to his words.

"I don't know what you mean, Mr. Povey," said Mrs. Baines stiffly. This was a simple lie.

"Well, really, Mrs. Baines!" Mr. Povey protested, "I suppose you won't deny that you know there is something between me and Constance? I suppose you won't deny that?"

"What is there between you and Constance? I can assure you I—"

"That depends on you," Mr. Povey interrupted her. When he was nervous his manners deteriorated into a behaviour that resembled rudeness. "That depends on you!" he repeated grimly.

"But—"

"Are we to be engaged or are we not?" pursued Mr. Povey, as though Mrs. Baines had been guilty of some grave lapse and he was determined not to spare her. "That's what I think ought to be settled, one way or the other. I wish to be perfectly open and aboveboard—in the future, as I have been in the past."

"But you have said nothing to me at all!" Mrs. Baines remonstrated, lifting her eyebrows. The way in which the man had sprung this matter upon her was truly too audacious.

Mr. Povey approached her as she sat at the table, shaking her ringlets and looking at her hands.

"You know there's something between us!" he insisted.

"How should I know there is something between you? Constance has never said a word to me. And have you?"

"Well," said he. "We've hidden nothing."

"What is there between you and Constance? If I may ask!"

"That depends on you," said he again.

"Have you asked her to be your wife?"

"No. I haven't exactly asked her to be my wife." He hesitated. "You see—"

Mrs. Baines collected her forces. "Have you kissed her?" This in a cold voice.

Mr. Povey now blushed. "I haven't exactly kissed her," he stammered, apparently shocked by the inquisition. "No, I should not say that I had kissed her."

It might have been that before committing himself he felt a desire for Mrs. Baines's definition of a kiss.

"You are very extraordinary," she said loftily. It was no less than the truth.

"All I want to know is—have you got anything against me?" he demanded roughly. "Because if so——"

"Anything against you, Mr. Povey? Why should I have anything against you?"

"Then why can't we be engaged?"

She considered that he was bullying her. "That's another question," said she.

"Why can't we be engaged? An't I good enough?"

The fact was that he was not regarded as good enough. Mrs. Maddack had certainly deemed that he was not good enough. He was a solid mass of excellent qualities; but he lacked brilliance, importance, dignity. He could not impose himself. Such had been the verdict.

And now, while Mrs. Baines was secretly reproaching Mr. Povey for his inability to impose himself, he was most patently imposing himself on her—and the phenomenon escaped her! She felt that he was bullying her, but somehow she could not perceive his power. Yet the man who could bully Mrs. Baines was surely no common soul!

"You know my very high opinion of you," she said.

Mr. Povey pursued in a mollified tone, "Assuming

that Constance is willing to be engaged, do I understand you consent?"

"But Constance is too young."

"Constance is twenty. She is more than twenty."

"In any case you won't expect me to give you an answer now."

"Why not? You know my position."

She did. From a practical point of view the match would be ideal: no fault could be found with it on that side. But Mrs. Baines could not extinguish the idea that it would be a "come-down" for her daughter. Who, after all, was Mr. Povey? Mr. Povey was nobody.

"I must think things over," she said firmly, putting her lips together. "I can't reply like this. It is a serious matter."

"When can I have your answer? To-morrow?"

"No—really—"

"In a week, then?"

"I cannot bind myself to a date," said Mrs. Baines, haughtily. She felt that she was gaining ground.

"Because I can't stay on here indefinitely as things are," Mr. Povey burst out, and there was a touch of hysteria in his tone.

"Now, Mr. Povey, please do be reasonable."

"That's all very well," he went on. "That's all very well. But what I say is that employers have no right to have male assistants in their houses unless they are prepared to let their daughters marry! That's what I say! No *right!*"

Mrs. Baines did not know what to answer.

The aspirant wound up: "I must leave if that's the case."

"If what's the case?" she asked herself, "What has



come over him?" And aloud: "You know you would place me in a very awkward position by leaving, and I hope you don't want to mix up two quite different things. I hope you aren't trying to threaten me."

"Threaten you!" he cried. "Do you suppose I should leave here for fun? If I leave it will be because I can't *stand* it. That's all. I can't stand it. I want Constance, and if I can't have her, then I can't *stand* it. What do you think I'm made of?"

"I'm sure—" she began.

"That's all very well!" he almost shouted.

"But please let me speak," she said quietly.

"All I say is I can't *stand* it. That's all. . . . Employers have no *right*. . . . We have our feelings like other men."

### III.

Shortly afterwards events occurred compared to which the vicissitudes of Mr. Povey's heart were of no more account than a shower of rain in April. And fate gave no warning of them; it rather indicated a complete absence of events. When the customary advice circular arrived from Birkinshaws, the name of "our Mr. Gerald Scales" was replaced on it by another and an unfamiliar name. Mrs. Baines, seeing the circular by accident, experienced a sense of relief, mingled with the professional disappointment of a diplomatist who has elaborately provided for contingencies which have failed to happen. She had sent Sophia away for nothing; and no doubt her maternal affection had exaggerated a molehill into a mountain. Really, when she reflected on the past, she could not recall a single fact that would justify her theory of an attachment secretly budding between Sophia and the young

man Scales! Not a single little fact! All she could bring forward was that Sophia had twice encountered Scales in the street.

She felt a curious interest in the fate of Scales, for whom in her own mind she had long prophesied evil, and when Birkinshaws' representative came she took care to be in the shop; her intention was to converse with him, and ascertain as much as was ascertainable, after Mr. Povey had transacted business. For this purpose, at a suitable moment, she traversed the shop to Mr. Povey's side, and in so doing she had a fleeting view of King Street, and in King Street of a familiar vehicle. She stopped, and seemed to catch the distant sound of knocking. Abandoning the traveller, she hurried towards the parlour, in the passage she assuredly did hear knocking, angry and impatient knocking, the knocking of someone who thinks he has knocked too long.

"Of course Maggie is at the top of the house!" she muttered sarcastically.

She unchained, unbolted, and unlocked the side-door.

"At last!" It was Aunt Harriet's voice, exacerbated. "What! You, sister? You're soon up. What a blessing!"

The two majestic and imposing creatures met on the mat, craning forward so that their lips might meet above their terrific bosoms.

"What's the matter?" Mrs. Baines asked, fearfully.

"Well, I do declare!" said Mrs. Maddack. "And I've driven specially over to ask *you!*"

"Where's Sophia?" demanded Mrs. Baines.

"You don't mean to say she's not come, sister?" Mrs. Maddack sank down onto the sofa.

"Come?" Mrs. Baines repeated. "Of course she's not come! What do you mean, sister?"

"The very moment she got Constance's letter yesterday, saying you were ill in bed and she'd better come over to help in the shop, she started. I got Bratt's dog-cart for her."

Mrs. Baines in her turn also sank down onto the sofa.

"I've not been ill," she said. "And Constance hasn't written for a week! Only yesterday I was telling her—"

"Sister—it can't be! Sophia had letters from Constance every morning. At least she said they were from Constance. I told her to be sure and write me how you were last night, and she promised faithfully she would. And it was because I got nothing by this morning's post that I decided to come over myself, to see if it was anything serious."

"Serious it is!" murmured Mrs. Baines.

"What—"

"Sophia's run off. That's the plain English of it!" said Mrs. Baines with frigid calm.

"Nay! That I'll never believe. I've looked after Sophia night and day as if she was my own, and—"

"If she hasn't run off, where is she?"

Mrs. Maddack opened the door with a tragic gesture.

"Bladen," she called in a loud voice to the driver of the waggonette, who was standing on the pavement.

"Yes'm."

"It was Pember drove Miss Sophia yesterday, wasn't it?"

"Yes'm."

She hesitated. A clumsy question might enlighten a member of the class which ought never to be enlightened about one's private affairs.

"He didn't come all the way here?"

"No'm. He happened to say last night when he got

back as Miss Sophia had told him to set her down at Knype Station."

"I thought so!" said Mrs. Maddack, courageously.

"Yes'm."

"Sister!" she moaned, after carefully shutting the door. They clung to each other.

Sophia was gone. She was gone with Gerald Scales. That beautiful child, that incalculable, untamable, impossible creature, had committed the final folly; without pretext or excuse, and with what elaborate deceit! Yes, without excuse! She had not been treated harshly; she had had a degree of liberty which would have astounded and shocked her grandmothers; she had been petted, humoured, spoilt. And her answer was to disgrace the family by an act as irrevocable as it was utterly vicious.

What was to be done? Tell dear Constance? No, this was not, at the moment, an affair for the younger generation. It was too new and raw for the younger generation. Moreover, capable, proud, and experienced as they were, they felt the need of a man's voice, and a man's hard, callous ideas. It was a case for Mr. Critchlow. Maggie was sent to fetch him, with a particular request that he should come to the side-door. He came expectant, with the pleasurable anticipation of disaster, and he was not disappointed. He passed with the sisters the happiest hour that had fallen to him for years. Quickly he arranged the alternatives for them. Would they tell the police, or would they take the risks of waiting? They shied away, but with fierce brutality he brought them again and again to the immediate point of decision. . . . Well, they could not tell the police! They simply could not. . . . Then they must face another danger. . . . He had no mercy for them. And while he was torturing

them there arrived a telegram, despatched from Charing Cross, "I am all right, Sophia." That proved, at any rate, that the child was not heartless, not merely careless.

Only yesterday, it seemed to Mrs. Baines, she had borne Sophia; only yesterday she was a baby, a school-girl to be smacked. The years rolled up in a few hours. And now she was sending telegrams from a place called Charing Cross! How unlike was the hand of the telegram to Sophia's hand! How mysteriously curt and inhuman was that official hand, as Mrs. Baines stared at it through red, wet eyes!

Mr. Critchlow said someone should go to Manchester, to ascertain about Scales. He went himself, that afternoon, and returned with the news that an aunt of Scales had recently died, leaving him twelve thousand pounds, and that he had, after quarrelling with his uncle Boldero, abandoned Birkinshaws at an hour's notice and vanished with his inheritance.

"It's as plain as a pikestaff," said Mr. Critchlow. "I could ha' warned ye o' all this years ago, ever since she killed her father!"

The next day people began to know. A whisper almost inaudible went across the Square, and into the town: and in the stillness everyone heard it. "Sophia Baines run off with a commercial!"

In another fortnight a note came, also dated from London.

"Dear Mother, I am married to Gerald Scales. Please don't worry about me. We are going abroad. Your affectionate Sophia. Love to Constance." No tear-stains on that pale-blue sheet! No sign of agitation!

And Mrs. Baines said: "My life is over." It was, though she was scarcely fifty. She felt old, old and

beaten. She had fought and been vanquished. The everlasting purpose had been too much for her. Virtue had gone out of her—the virtue to hold up her head and look the Square in the face. She, the wife of John Baines! She, a Syme of Axe!

Old houses, in the course of their history, see sad sights, and never forget them! And ever since, in the solemn physiognomy of the triple house of John Baines at the corner of St. Luke's Square and King Street, have remained the traces of the sight it saw on the morning of the afternoon when Mr. and Mrs. Povey returned from their honeymoon—the sight of Mrs. Baines getting into the waggonette for Axe; Mrs. Baines, encumbered with trunks and parcels, leaving the scene of her struggles and her defeat, whither she had once come as slim as a wand, to return stout and heavy, and heavy-hearted, to her childhood; content to live with her grandiose sister until such time as she should be ready for burial! The grimy and impassive old house perhaps heard her heart saying: “Only yesterday they were little girls, ever so tiny, and now—” The driving-off of a waggonette can be a dreadful thing.

## BOOK II.

### CONSTANCE.

#### CHAPTER I.

##### REVOLUTION.

##### I.

"WELL," said Mr. Povey, rising from the rocking-chair that in a previous age had been John Baines's, "I've got to make a start some time, so I may as well begin now!"

And he went from the parlour into the shop. Constance's eye followed him as far as the door, where their glances met for an instant in the transient gaze which expresses the tenderness of people who feel more than they kiss.

It was on the morning of this day that Mrs. Baines, relinquishing the sovereignty of St. Luke's Square, had gone to live as a younger sister in the house of Harriet Maddack at Axe. Constance guessed little of the secret anguish of that departure. She only knew that it was just like her mother, having perfectly arranged the entire house for the arrival of the honeymoon couple from Buxton, to flit early away so as to spare the natural blushing diffidence of the said couple. It was like her mother's commonsense and her mother's sympathetic comprehension. Further, Constance did not pursue her mother's feelings, being far too busy with her own. She sat there

full of new knowledge and new importance, brimming with experience and strange, unexpected aspirations, purposes, yes—and cunnings! And yet, though the very curves of her cheeks seemed to be mysteriously altering, the old Constance still lingered in that frame, an innocent soul hesitating to spread its wings and quit for ever the body which had been its home; you could see the timid thing peeping wistfully out of the eyes of the married woman.

Constance rang the bell for Maggie to clear the table; and as she did so she had the illusion that she was not really a married woman and a house-mistress, but only a kind of counterfeit. She did most fervently hope that all would go right in the house—at any rate until she had grown more accustomed to her situation.

The hope was to be disappointed. Maggie's rather silly, obsequious smile concealed but for a moment the ineffable tragedy that had lain in wait for unarmed Constance.

"If you please, Mrs. Povey," said Maggie, as she crushed cups together on the tin tray with her great, red hands, which always looked like something out of a butcher's shop; then a pause, "Will you please accept of this?"

Now, before the wedding Maggie had already, with tears of affection, given Constance a pair of blue glass vases (in order to purchase which she had been obliged to ask for special permission to go out), and Constance wondered what was coming now from Maggie's pocket. A small piece of folded paper came from Maggie's pocket. Constance accepted of it, and read: "I begs to give one month's notice to leave. Signed Maggie. June 10, 1867."

"Maggie!" exclaimed the old Constance, terrified by



this incredible occurrence, ere the married woman could strangle her.

"I never give notice before, Mrs. Povey," said Maggie, "so I don't know as I know how it ought for be done—not rightly. But I hope as you'll accept of it, Mrs. Povey."

"Oh! of course," said Mrs. Povey, primly, just as if Maggie was not the central supporting pillar of the house, just as if Maggie had not assisted at her birth, just as if the end of the world had not abruptly been announced, just as if St. Luke's Square were not inconceivable without Maggie. "But why——"

"Well, Mrs. Povey, I've been a-thinking it over in my kitchen, and I said to myself: 'If there's going to be one change there'd better be two,' I says. Not but what I wouldn't work my fingers to the bone for ye, Miss Constance."

Here Maggie began to cry into the tray.

Constance looked at her. Despite the special muslin of that day she had traces of the slatternliness of which Mrs. Baines had never been able to cure her. She was over forty, big, gawky. She had no figure, no charms of any kind. She was what was left of a woman after twenty-two years in the cave of a philanthropic family. And in her cave she had actually been thinking things over! Constance detected for the first time, beneath the dehumanised drudge, the stirrings of a separate and perhaps capricious individuality. Maggie's engagements had never been real to her employers. Within the house she had never been, in practice, anything but "Maggie"—an organism. And now she was permitting herself ideas about changes!

"You'll soon be suited with another, Mrs. Povey,"

said Maggie. "There's many a—many a—" She burst into sobs.

"But if you really want to leave, what are you crying for, Maggie?" asked Mrs. Povey, at her wisest. "Have you told mother?"

"No, miss," Maggie whimpered, absently wiping her wrinkled cheeks with ineffectual muslin. "I couldn't seem to fancy telling your mother. And as you're the mistress now, I thought as I'd save it for you when you come home. I hope you'll excuse me, Mrs. Povey."

"Of course I'm very sorry. You've been a very good servant. And in these days—"

The child had acquired this turn of speech from her mother. It did not appear to occur to either of them that they were living in the sixties.

"Thank ye, miss."

"And what are you thinking of doing, Maggie? You know you won't get many places like this."

"To tell ye the truth, Mrs. Povey, I'm going to get married mysen."

"Indeed!" murmured Constance, with the perfunctoriness of habit in replying to these tidings.

"Oh! but I am, mum," Maggie insisted. "It's all settled. Mr. Hollins, mum."

"Not Hollins, the fish-hawker!"

"Yes, mum. I seem to fancy him. You don't remember as him and me was engaged in '48. He was my first, like. I broke it off because he was in that Chartist lot, and I knew as Mr. Baines would never stand that. Now he's asked me again. He's been a widower this long time."

"I'm sure I hope you'll be happy, Maggie. But what about his habits?"

"He won't have no habits with me, Mrs. Povey."

A woman was definitely emerging from the drudge.

Constance ran into the shop—or she would have run if she had not checked her girlishness betimes—and on her lips, ready to be whispered importantly into a husband's astounded ear, were the words, "Maggie has given notice! Yes! Truly!" But Samuel Povey was engaged. He was leaning over the counter and staring at an outspread paper upon which a certain Mr. Yardley was making strokes with a thick pencil. Mr. Yardley, who had a long red beard, painted houses and rooms. She could not interrupt her husband, he was wholly absorbed; nor could she stay in the shop (which appeared just a little smaller than usual), for that would have meant an unsuccessful endeavour to front the young lady-assistants as though nothing in particular had happened to her. So she went sedately up the show-room stairs and thus to the bedroom floors of the house—her house! Mrs. Povey's house! She even climbed to Constance's old bedroom; her mother had stripped the bed—that was all, except a slight diminution of this room, corresponding to that of the shop! Then to the drawing-room. In the recess outside the drawing-room door the black box of silver plate still lay. She had expected her mother to take it; but no! Assuredly her mother was one to do things handsomely—when she did them. In the drawing-room, not a tassel of an anti-macassar touched! Yes, the fire-screen, the luscious bunch of roses on an expanse of mustard, which Constance had worked for her mother years ago, was gone! That her mother should have clung to just that one souvenir, out of all the heavy opulence of the drawing-room, touched Constance intimately. She perceived that if she could not talk to her husband she must write to her mother.

And she sat down at the oval table and wrote, "Darling mother, I am sure you will be very surprised to hear . . . She means it. . . . I think she is making a serious mistake. Ought I to put an advertisement in the *Signal*, or will it do if . . . Please write by return. We are back and have enjoyed ourselves very much. Sam says he enjoys getting up late. . . ." And so on to the last inch of the fourth scalloped page.

Mr. Povey came in to supper, laden with ledgers and similar works which Constance had never even pretended to understand. It was a sign from him that the honeymoon was over. He was proprietor now, and his ardour for ledgers most justifiable. Still, there was the question of her servant.

"Never!" he exclaimed, when she told him all about the end of the world. A "never" which expressed extreme astonishment and the liveliest concern!

But Constance had anticipated that he would have been just a little more knocked down, bowled over, staggered, stunned, flabbergasted. In a swift gleam of insight she saw that she had been in danger of forgetting her *rôle* of experienced, capable married woman.

"I shall have to set about getting a fresh one," she said hastily, with an admirable assumption of light and easy casualness.

Mr. Povey seemed to think that Hollins would suit Maggie pretty well. He made no remark to the betrothed when she answered the final bell of the night.

He opened his ledgers, whistling.

"I think I shall go up, dear," said Constance. "I've a lot of things to put away."

"Do," said he. "Call out when you've done,"

## II.

"Sam!" she cried from the top of the crooked stairs. No answer. The door at the foot was closed.

"Sam!"

"Hello?" Distantly, faintly.

"I've done all I'm going to do to-night."

And she ran back along the corridor, a white figure in the deep gloom, and hurried into bed, and drew the clothes up to her chin.

In the life of a bride there are some dramatic moments. If she has married the industrious apprentice, one of those moments occurs when she first occupies the sacred bed-chamber of her ancestors, and the bed on which she was born. Her parents' room had always been to Constance, if not sacred, at least invested with a certain moral solemnity. She could not enter it as she would enter another room. The course of nature, with its succession of deaths, conceptions, and births, slowly makes such a room august with a mysterious quality which interprets the grandeur of mere existence and imposes itself on all.

Mr. Povey entered, the bridegroom, quickly, firmly, carrying it off rather well, but still self-conscious. "After all," his shoulders were trying to say, "what's the difference between this bedroom and the bedroom of a boarding-house? Indeed, ought we not to feel more at home here? Besides, confound it, we've been married a fortnight!"

"Doesn't it give you a funny feeling, sleeping in this room? It does me," said Constance. Women, even experienced women, are so foolishly frank. They have no decency, no self-respect.

"Really?" replied Mr. Povey, with loftiness, as who should say: "What an extraordinary thing that a reason-

able creature can have such fancies! Now to me this room is exactly like any other room." And he added aloud, glancing away from the glass, where he was unfastening his necktie: "It's not a bad room at all." This, with the judicial air of an auctioneer.

Not for an instant did he deceive Constance, who read his real sensations with accuracy. But his futile poses did not in the slightest degree lessen her respect for him. On the contrary, she admired him the more for them; they were a sort of embroidery on the solid stuff of his character.

Mr. Povey was an exceedingly methodical person, and he was also one of those persons who must always be "beforehand" with time. Thus at night he would arrange his raiment so that in the morning it might be reassumed in the minimum of minutes. He was not a man, for example, to leave the changing of studs from one shirt to another till the morrow. Had it been practicable, he would have brushed his hair the night before. Constance already loved to watch his meticulous preparations. She saw him now go into his old bedroom and return with a paper collar, which he put on the dressing-table next to a black necktie. His shop-suit was laid out on a chair.

"Oh, Sam!" she exclaimed impulsively, "you surely aren't going to begin wearing those horrid paper collars again!" During the honeymoon he had worn linen collars.

Her tone was perfectly gentle, but the remark, nevertheless, showed a lack of tact. It implied that all his life Mr. Povey had been enveloping his neck in something which was horrid. Like all persons with a tendency to fall into the ridiculous, Mr. Povey was exceedingly sensitive to personal criticisms. He flushed darkly.

"I didn't know they were 'horrid,'" he snapped. He

was hurt and angry. Anger had surprised him un-awares.

Both of them suddenly saw that they were standing on the edge of a chasm, and drew back. They had imagined themselves to be wandering safely in a flowered meadow, and here was this bottomless chasm! It was most disconcerting.

Mr. Povey's hand hovered undecided over the collar. "However—" he muttered.

She could feel that he was trying with all his might to be gentle and pacific. And she was aghast at her own stupid clumsiness, she so experienced!

"Just as you like, dear," she said quickly. "Please!"

"Oh no!" And he did his best to smile, and went off gawkily with the collar and came back with a linen one.

Her passion for him burned stronger than ever. She knew then that she did not love him for his good qualities, but for something boyish and naïve that there was about him, an indescribable something that occasionally, when his face was close to hers, made her dizzy.

The chasm had disappeared. In such moments, when each must pretend not to have seen or even suspected the chasm, small-talk is essential.

"Wasn't that Mr. Yardley in the shop to-night?" began Constance.

"Yes."

"What did he want?"

"I'd sent for him. He's going to paint us a sign-board."

Useless for Samuel to make-believe that nothing in this world is more ordinary than a sign-board.

"Oh!" murmured Constance. She said no more, the episode of the paper collar having weakened her self-confidence.

But a sign-board!

What with servants, chasms, and signboards, Constance considered that her life as a married woman would not be deficient in excitement. Long afterwards, she fell asleep, thinking of Sophia.

### III.

A few days later, while Constance was arranging the more precious of her wedding-presents in the parlour, Maggie was cleaning the steps that led from the pavement of King Street to the side-door, and the door was ajar. It was a fine June morning.

Suddenly, over the sound of scouring, Constance heard a dog's low growl and then the hoarse voice of a man:

"Mester in, wench?"

"Happen he is, happen he isn't," came Maggie's answer. She had no fancy for being called wench.

Constance went to the door, not merely from curiosity, but from a feeling that her authority and her responsibilities as house-mistress extended to the pavement surrounding the house.

The famous James Boon, of Buck Row, the greatest dog-fancier in the Five Towns, stood at the bottom of the steps: a tall, fat man, clad in stiff, stained brown and smoking a black clay pipe less than three inches long. Behind him attended two bull-dogs.

"Morning, missis!" cried Boon, cheerfully. "I've heerd tell as th' mister is looking out for a dog, as you might say."

"I don't stay here with them animals a-sniffing at me—no, that I don't!" observed Maggie, picking herself up.

"Is he?" Constance hesitated. She knew that Samuel had vaguely referred to dogs; she had not, however,



imagined that he regarded a dog as aught but a beautiful dream. No dog had ever put paw into that house, and it seemed impossible that one should ever do so. As for those beasts of prey on the pavement . . .!

"Aye!" said James Boon, calmly.

"I'll tell him you're here," said Constance. "But I don't know if he's at liberty. He seldom is at this time of day. Maggie, you'd better come in."

She went slowly to the shop, full of fear for the future.

"Sam," she whispered to her husband, who was writing at his desk, "here's a man come to see you about a dog."

Assuredly he was taken aback. Still, he behaved with much presence of mind.

"Oh, about a dog! Who is it?"

"It's that Jim Boon. He says he's heard you want one."

The renowned name of Jim Boon gave him pause; but he had to go through with the affair, and he went through with it, though nervously. Constance followed his agitated footsteps to the side-door.

"Morning, Boon."

"Morning, mester."

They began to talk dogs, Mr. Povey, for his part, with due caution.

"Now, there's a dog!" said Boon, pointing to one of the bull-dogs, a miracle of splendid ugliness.

"Yes," responded Mr. Povey, insincerely. "He is a beauty. What's it worth now, at a venture?"

"I'll tak' a hundred and twenty sovereigns for her," said Boon. "Th' other's a bit cheaper—a hundred."

"Oh, Sam!" gasped Constance.

And even Mr. Povey nearly lost his nerve. "That's more than I want to give," said he timidly.

"But look at her!" Boon persisted, roughly snatching up the more expensive animal, and displaying her cannibal teeth.

Mr. Povey shook his head. Constance glanced away.

"That's not quite the sort of dog I want," said Mr. Povey.

"Fox-terrier?"

"Yes, that's more like," Mr. Povey agreed eagerly.

"What'll ye run to?"

"Oh," said Mr. Povey, largely, "I don't know."

"Will ye run to a tenner?"

"I thought of something cheaper."

"Well, hoo much? Out wi' it, mester."

"Not more than two pounds," said Mr. Povey. He would have said one pound had he dared. The prices of dogs amazed him.

"I thowt it was a *dog* as ye wanted!" said Boon. "Look 'ere, mester. Come up to my yard and see what I've got."

"I will," said Mr. Povey.

"And bring missis along too. Now, what about a cat for th' missis? Or a gold-fish?"

The end of the episode was that a young lady aged some twelve months entered the Povey household on trial. Her exiguous legs twinkled all over the parlour, and she had the oddest appearance in the parlour. But she was so confiding, so affectionate, so timorous, and her black nose was so icy in that hot weather, that Constance loved her violently within an hour. Mr. Povey made rules for her. He explained to her that she must never, never go into the shop. But she went, and he whipped her to the squealing point, and Constance cried an instant, while admiring her husband's firmness.

The dog was not all.

On another day Constance, prying into the least details of the parlour, discovered a box of cigars inside the lid of the harmonium, on the keyboard. She was so unaccustomed to cigars that at first she did not realise what the object was. Her father had never smoked, nor drunk intoxicants; nor had Mr. Critchlow. Nobody had ever smoked in that house, where tobacco had always been regarded as equally licentious with cards, "the devil's playthings." Certainly Samuel had never smoked in the house, though the sight of the cigar-box reminded Constance of an occasion when her mother had announced an incredulous suspicion that Mr. Povey, fresh from an excursion into the world on a Thursday evening, "smelt of smoke."

She closed the harmonium and kept silence.

That very night, coming suddenly into the parlour, she caught Samuel at the harmonium. The lid went down with a resonant bang that awoke sympathetic vibrations in every corner of the room.

"What is it?" Constance inquired, jumping.

"Oh, nothing!" replied Mr. Povey, carelessly.

Each was deceiving the other: Mr. Povey hid his crime, and Constance hid her knowledge of his crime. False, false! But this is what marriage is.

And the next day Constance had a visit in the shop from a possible new servant, recommended to her by Mr. Holl, the grocer.

"Will you please step this way?" said Constance, with affable primness, steeped in the novel sense of what it is to be the sole responsible mistress of a vast household. She preceded the girl to the parlour, and as they passed the open door of Mr. Povey's cutting-out room

Constance had the clear vision and titillating odour of her husband smoking a cigar. He was in his shirt-sleeves, calmly cutting out, and Fan (the lady companion), at watch on the bench, yapped at the possible new servant.

"I think I shall try that girl," said she to Samuel at tea. She said nothing as to the cigar; nor did he.

On the following evening, after supper, Mr. Povey burst out:

"I think I'll have a weed! You didn't know I smoked, did you?"

Thus Mr. Povey came out in his true colours as a blood, a blade, and a gay spark.

But dogs and cigars, disconcerting enough in their degree, were to the sign-board, when the sign-board at last came, as skim milk is to hot brandy. It was the sign-board that, more startlingly than anything else, marked the dawn of a new era in St. Luke's Square. Four men spent a day and a half in fixing it; they had ladders, ropes, and pulleys, and two of them dined on the flat lead roof of the projecting shop-windows. The sign-board was thirty-five feet long and two feet in depth; over its centre was a semicircle about three feet in radius; this semicircle bore the legend, judiciously disposed, "S. Povey. Late." All the sign-board proper was devoted to the words, "John Baines," in gold letters a foot and a half high, on a green ground.

The Square watched and wondered; and murmured: "Well, bless us! What next?"

It was agreed that in giving paramount importance to the name of his late father-in-law, Mr. Povey had displayed a very nice feeling.

Some asked with glee: "What'll the old lady have to say?"

Constance asked herself this, but not with glee. When Constance walked down the Square homewards, she could scarcely bear to look at the sign; the thought of what her mother might say frightened her. Her mother's first visit of state was imminent, and Aunt Harriet was to accompany her. Constance felt almost sick as the day approached. When she faintly hinted her apprehensions to Samuel, he demanded, as if surprised—

“Haven't you mentioned it in one of your letters?”

“Oh *no!*”

“If that's all,” said he, with bravado, “I'll write and tell her myself.”

#### IV.

So that Mrs. Baines was duly apprised of the sign-board before her arrival. The letter written by her to Constance after receiving Samuel's letter, which was merely the amiable epistle of a son-in-law anxious to be a little more than correct, contained no reference to the sign-board. This silence, however, did not in the least allay Constance's apprehensions as to what might occur when her mother and Samuel met beneath the sign-board itself. It was therefore with a fearful as well as an eager, loving heart that Constance opened her side-door and ran down the steps when the waggonette stopped in King Street on the Thursday morning of the great visit of the sisters. But a surprise awaited her. Aunt Harriet had not come. Mrs. Baines explained, as she soundly kissed her daughter, that at the last moment Aunt Harriet had not felt well enough to undertake the journey. She sent her fondest love, and cake. Her pains had recurred.

“What is it, do you think?” Constance inquired.

Mrs. Baines pushed her lips out and raised her eyebrows—a gesture which meant that the pains might mean God knew what.

“I hope she’ll be all right alone,” observed Constance.

“Of course,” said Mrs. Baines, quickly. “But you don’t suppose I was going to disappoint you, do you?” she added, looking round as if to defy the fates in general.

This speech, and its tone, gave intense pleasure to Constance; and, laden with parcels, they mounted the stairs together, very content with each other, very happy in the discovery that they were still mother and daughter, very intimate in an inarticulate way.

Constance had imagined long, detailed, absorbing, and highly novel conversations between herself and her mother upon this their first meeting after her marriage. But alone in the bedroom, and with a clear half-hour to dinner, they neither of them seemed to have a great deal to impart.

Mrs. Baines slowly removed her light mantle and laid it with precautions on the white damask counterpane. Then, fingering her weeds, she glanced about the chamber. Nothing was changed. Though Constance had, previous to her marriage, envisaged certain alterations, she had determined to postpone them, feeling that one revolutionist in a house was enough.

“Well, my chick, you all right?” said Mrs. Baines, with hearty and direct energy, gazing straight into her daughter’s eyes.

Constance perceived that the question was universal in its comprehensiveness, the one unique expression that the mother would give to her maternal concern and curiosity, and that it condensed into six words as much interest as would have overflowed into a whole day of the

chatter of some mothers. She met the candid glance, flushing.

"Oh *yes!*" she answered with ecstatic fervour. "Perfectly!"

And Mrs. Baines nodded, as if dismissing *that*. "You're stouter," said she, curtly. "If you're not careful you'll be as big as any of us."

"Oh, mother!"

The interview fell to a lower plane of emotion. It even fell as far as Maggie. What chiefly preoccupied Constance was a subtle change in her mother. She found her mother fussy in trifles. Her manner of laying down her mantle, of smoothing out her gloves, and her anxiety that her bonnet should not come to harm, were rather trying, were perhaps, in the very slightest degree, pitiable. It was nothing; it was barely perceptible, and yet it was enough to alter Constance's mental attitude to her mother. "Poor dear!" thought Constance. "I'm afraid she's not what she was." Incredible that her mother could have aged in less than six weeks! Constance did not allow for the chemistry that had been going on in herself.

The encounter between Mrs. Baines and her son-in-law was of the most satisfactory nature. He was waiting in the parlour for her to descend. He made himself exceedingly agreeable, kissing her, and flattering her by his evidently sincere desire to please. He explained that he had kept an eye open for the waggonette, but had been called away. His "Dear me!" on learning about Aunt Harriet lacked nothing in conviction, though both women knew that his affection for Aunt Harriet would never get the better of his reason. To Constance, her husband's behaviour was marvellously perfect. She had not suspected him to be such a man of the world. And her

eyes said to her mother, quite unconsciously: "You see, after all, you didn't rate Sam as high as you ought to have done. Now you see your mistake."

As they sat waiting for dinner, Constance and Mrs. Baines on the sofa, and Samuel on the edge of the nearest rocking-chair, a small scuffling noise was heard outside the door which gave on the kitchen steps, the door yielded to pressure, and Fan rushed importantly in, deranging mats. Fan's nose had been hinting to her that she was behind the times, not up-to-date in the affairs of the household, and she had hurried from the kitchen to make inquiries. It occurred to her *en route* that she had been washed that morning. The spectacle of Mrs. Baines stopped her. She stood, with her legs slightly outstretched, her nose lifted, her ears raking forward, her bright eyes blinking, and her tail undecided. "I was sure I'd never smelt anything like that before," she was saying to herself, as she stared at Mrs. Baines.

And Mrs. Baines, staring at Fan, had a similar though not the same sentiment. The silence was terrible. Constance took on the mien of a culprit, and Sam had obviously lost his easy bearing of a man of the world. Mrs. Baines was merely thunderstruck.

A dog!

Suddenly Fan's tail began to wag more quickly; and then, having looked in vain for encouragement to her master and mistress, she gave one mighty spring and alighted in Mrs. Baines's lap. It was an aim she could not have missed. Constance emitted an "Oh, *Fan!*" of shocked terror, and Samuel betrayed his nervous tension by an involuntary movement. But Fan had settled down into that titanic lap as into heaven. It was a greater flattery than Mr. Povey's.



"So your name's Fan!" murmured Mrs. Baines, stroking the animal. "You are a dear!"

"Yes, isn't she?" said Constance, with inconceivable rapidity.

During the dinner, not a word as to the signboard! Several times the conversation curved towards that signboard in the most alarming fashion, but invariably it curved away again, like a train from another train when two trains are simultaneously leaving a station. Constance had frights, so serious as to destroy her anxiety about the cookery. In the end she comprehended that her mother had adopted a silently disapproving attitude. Fan was socially very useful throughout the repast.

After dinner Constance was on pins lest Samuel should light a cigar. She had not requested him not to do so, for though she was entirely sure of his affection, she had already learned that a husband is possessed by a demon of contrariety which often forces him to violate his higher feelings. However, Samuel did not light a cigar. He went off to superintend the shutting-up of the shop, while Mrs. Baines chatted with Maggie and gave her £5 for a wedding-present. Then Mr. Critchlow called to offer his salutations.

A little before tea Mrs. Baines announced that she would go out for a short walk by herself.

"Where has she gone to?" smiled Samuel, superiorly, as with Constance at the window he watched her turn down King Street towards the church.

"I expect she has gone to look at father's grave," said Constance.

"Oh!" muttered Samuel, apologetically.

Constance was mistaken. Before reaching the church, Mrs. Baines deviated to the right, got into Brougham

Street and thence, by Acre Lane, into Oldcastle Street, whose steep she climbed. Now, Oldcastle Street ends at the top of St. Luke's Square, and from the corner Mrs. Baines had an excellent view of the signboard. It being Thursday afternoon, scarce a soul was about. She returned to her daughter's by the same extraordinary route, and said not a word on entering. But she was markedly cheerful.

The waggonette came after tea, and Mrs. Baines made her final preparations to depart. The visit had proved a wonderful success; it would have been utterly perfect if Samuel had not marred it at the very door of the waggonette. Somehow, he contrived to be talking of Christmas. Only a person of Samuel's native clumsiness would have mentioned Christmas in July.

"You know you'll spend Christmas with us!" said he into the waggonette.

"Indeed I sha'n't!" replied Mrs. Baines. "Aunt Harriet and I will expect you at Axe. We've already settled that."

Mr. Povey bridled. "Oh no!" he protested, hurt by this summariness.

Having had no relatives, except his cousin the confectioner, for many years, he had dreamt of at last establishing a family Christmas under his own roof, and the dream was dear to him.

Mrs. Baines said nothing. "We couldn't possibly leave the shop," said Mr. Povey.

"Nonsense!" Mrs. Baines retorted, putting her lips together. "Christmas Day is on a Monday."

The waggonette in starting jerked her head towards the door and set all her curls shaking. No white in those curls yet, scarcely a touch of grey!

"I shall take good care we don't go there anyway," Mr. Povey mumbled, in his heat, half to himself and half to Constance.

He had stained the brightness of the day.

## CHAPTER II.

### CHRISTMAS AND THE FUTURE.

#### I.

MR. POVEY was playing a hymn tune on the harmonium, it having been decided that no one should go to chapel. Constance, in mourning, with a white apron over her dress, sat on a hassock in front of the fire; and near her, in a rocking-chair, Mrs. Baines swayed very gently to and fro. The weather was extremely cold. The era of good old-fashioned Christmases, so agreeably picturesque for the poor, was not yet at an end.

Yes, Samuel Povey had won the battle concerning the *locus* of the family Christmas. But he had received the help of a formidable ally, death. Mrs. Harriet Maddack had passed away, after an operation, leaving her house and her money to her sister. The solemn rite of her interment had deeply affected all the respectability of the town of Axe, where the late Mr. Maddack had been a figure of consequence; it had even shut up the shop in St. Luke's Square for a whole day. It was such a funeral as Aunt Harriet herself would have approved, a tremendous ceremonial which left on the crouched mind an ineffaceable, intricate impression of shiny cloth, crape, horses with arching necks and long manes, the drawl of parsons, cake, port, sighs, and Christian submission to the inscrutable decrees of Providence. Mrs. Baines had borne herself with unnatural calmness until the funeral was over:

and then Constance perceived that the remembered mother of her girlhood existed no longer. For the majority of human souls it would have been easier to love a virtuous principle, or a mountain, than to love Aunt Harriet, who was assuredly less a woman than an institution. But Mrs. Baines had loved her, and she had been the one person to whom Mrs. Baines looked for support and guidance. When she died, Mrs. Baines paid the tribute of respect with the last hoarded remains of her proud fortitude, and weepingly confessed that the unconquerable had been conquered, the inexhaustible exhausted; and became old with whitening hair.

She had persisted in her refusal to spend Christmas in Bursley, but both Constance and Samuel knew that the resistance was only formal. She soon yielded. When Constance's second new servant took it into her head to leave a week before Christmas, Mrs. Baines might have pointed out the finger of Providence at work again, and this time in her favour. But no! With amazing pliancy she suggested that she should bring one of her own servants to "tide Constance over" Christmas. She was met with all the forms of loving solicitude, and she found that her daughter and son-in-law had "turned out of" the state bedroom in her favour. Intensely flattered by this attention (which was Mr. Povey's magnanimous idea), she nevertheless protested strongly. Indeed she "would not hear of it."

"Now, mother, don't be silly," Constance had said firmly. "You don't expect us to be at all the trouble of moving back again, do you?" And Mrs. Baines had surrendered in tears.

Thus had come Christmas. Perhaps it was fortunate that, the Axe servant being not quite the ordinary servant,

but a benefactor where a benefactor was needed, both Constance and her mother thought it well to occupy themselves in household work, "sparing" the benefactor as much as possible. Hence Constance's white apron.

"There he is!" said Mr. Povey, still playing, but with his eye on the street.

Constance sprang up eagerly. Then there was a knock on the door. Constance opened, and an icy blast swept into the room. The postman stood on the steps, his instrument for knocking (like a drumstick) in one hand, a large bundle of letters in the other, and a yawning bag across the pit of his stomach.

"Merry Christmas, ma'am!" cried the postman, trying to keep warm by cheerfulness.

Constance, taking the letters, responded, while Mr. Povey, playing the harmonium with his right hand, drew half a crown from his pocket with the left.

"Here you are!" he said, giving it to Constance, who gave it to the postman.

Fan, who had been keeping her muzzle warm with the extremity of her tail on the sofa, jumped down to superintend the transaction.

"Brrr!" vibrated Mr. Povey as Constance shut the door.

"What lots!" Constance exclaimed, rushing to the fire. "Here, mother! Here, Sam!"

The girl had resumed possession of the woman's body.

Though the Baines family had few friends (sustained hospitality being little practised in those days) they had, of course, many acquaintances, and, like other families, they counted their Christmas cards as an Indian counts scalps. The tale was satisfactory. There were between thirty and forty envelopes. Constance extracted Christmas cards rapidly, reading their contents aloud, and then

propping them up on the mantelpiece. Mrs. Baines assisted. Fan dealt with the envelopes on the floor. Mr. Povey, to prove that his soul was above toys and gewgaws, continued to play the harmonium.

"Oh, mother!" Constance murmured in a startled, hesitant voice, holding an envelope.

"What is it, my chuck?"

"It's——"

The envelope was addressed to "Mrs. and Miss Baines" in large, perpendicular, dashing characters which Constance instantly recognised as Sophia's. The stamps were strange, the postmark "Paris." Mrs. Baines leaned forward and looked.

"Open it, child," she said.

The envelope contained an English Christmas card of a common type, a spray of holly with greetings, and on it was written, "I do hope this will reach you on Christmas morning. Fondest love." No signature, nor address.

Mrs. Baines took it with a trembling hand, and adjusted her spectacles. She gazed at it a long time.

"And it has done!" she said, and wept.

She tried to speak again, but not being able to command herself, held forth the card to Constance and jerked her head in the direction of Mr. Povey. Constance rose, and put the card on the keyboard of the harmonium.

"Sophia!" she whispered.

Mr. Povey stopped playing. "Dear, dear!" he muttered.

Fan, perceiving that nobody was interested in her feats, suddenly stood still.

Mrs. Baines tried once more to speak, but could not. Then, her ringlets shaking beneath the band of her weeds, she found her feet, stepped to the harmonium, and, with

a movement almost convulsive, snatched the card from Mr. Povey, and returned to her chair.

Mr. Povey abruptly left the room, followed by Fan. Both the women were in tears, and he was tremendously surprised to discover a dangerous lump in his own throat. The beautiful and imperious vision of Sophia, Sophia as she had left them, innocent, wayward, had swiftly risen up before him and made even him a woman too! Yet he had never liked Sophia. The awful secret wound in the family pride revealed itself to him as never before, and he felt intensely the mother's tragedy, which she carried in her breast as Aunt Harriet had carried a cancer.

At dinner he said suddenly to Mrs. Baines, who still wept: "Now, mother, you must cheer up, you know,"

"Yes, I must," she said quickly. And she did do.

Through the influence of Mrs. Baines a new servant was found for Constance in a village near Axe, a raw, comely girl who had never been in a "place." And through the post it was arranged that this innocent should come to the cave on the thirty-first of December. In obedience to the safe rule that servants should never be allowed to meet for the interchange of opinions, Mrs. Baines decided to leave with her own servant on the thirtieth. She would not be persuaded to spend the New Year in the Square. On the twenty-ninth poor Aunt Maria died all of a sudden in her cottage in Brougham Street. Everybody was duly distressed, and in particular Mrs. Baines's demeanour under this affliction showed the perfection of correctness. But she caused it to be understood that she should not remain for the funeral. Her nerves would be unequal to the ordeal; and, moreover, her servant must not stay to corrupt the new girl, nor could Mrs. Baines think of sending her servant to Axe in

advance, to spend several days in idle gossip with her colleague.

This decision took the backbone out of Aunt Maria's funeral, which touched the extreme of modesty: a hearse and a one-horse coach. Mr. Povey was glad, because he happened to be very busy. An hour before his mother-in-law's departure he came into the parlour with the proof of a poster.

"What is that, Samuel?" asked Mrs. Baines, not dreaming of the blow that awaited her.

"It's for my first Annual Sale," replied Mr. Povey with false tranquillity.

Mrs. Baines merely tossed her head. Constance, happily for Constance, was not present at this final defeat of the old order. Had she been there, she would certainly not have known where to look.

## II.

"Forty next birthday!" Mr. Povey exclaimed one day, with an expression and in a tone that were at once mock-serious and serious. This was on his thirty-ninth birthday.

Constance was startled. She had, of course, been aware that they were getting older, but she had never realised the phenomenon. Though customers occasionally remarked that Mr. Povey was stouter, and though when she helped him to measure himself for a new suit of clothes the tape proved the fact, he had not changed for her. She knew that she too had become somewhat stouter; but for herself, she remained exactly the same Constance. Only by recalling dates and by calculations could she really grasp that she had been married a little over six years and not a little over six months. She had to admit that, if Samuel would be forty next birthday,



she would be twenty-seven next birthday. But it would not be a real twenty-seven; nor would Sam's forty be a real forty, like other people's twenty-sevens and forties. Not long since she had been in the habit of regarding a man of forty as senile, as practically in his grave.

She reflected, and the more she reflected the more clearly she saw that after all the almanacs had not lied. Look at Fan! Yes, it must be five years since the memorable morning when doubt first crossed the minds of Samuel and Constance as to Fan's moral principles. Samuel's enthusiasm for dogs was equalled by his ignorance of the dangers to which a young female of temperament may be exposed, and he was much disturbed as doubt developed into certainty. Fan, indeed, was the one being who did not suffer from shock and who had no fears as to the results. The animal, having a pure mind, was bereft of modesty. Sundry enormities had she committed, but none to rank with this one! The result was four quadrupeds recognisable as fox-terriers. Mr. Povey breathed again. Fan had had more luck than she deserved, for the result might have been simply anything. Her owners forgave her and disposed of these fruits of iniquity, and then married her lawfully to a husband who was so high up in the world that he could demand a dowry. And now Fan was a grandmother, with fixed ideas and habits, and a son in the house, and various grandchildren scattered over the town. Fan was a sedate and disillusioned dog. She knew the world as it was, and in learning it she had taught her owners above a bit.

Then there was Maggie Hollins. Constance could still vividly recall the self-consciousness with which she had one day received Maggie and the heir of the Hollinses; but it was a long time ago. After staggering half the

town by the production of this infant (of which she nearly died) Maggie allowed the angels to waft it away to heaven, and everybody said that she ought to be very thankful—at her age. Old women dug up out of their minds forgotten histories of the eccentricities of the goddess Lucina. Mrs. Baines was most curiously interested; she talked freely to Constance, and Constance began to see what an incredible town Bursley had always been—and she never suspected it! Maggie was now mother of other children, and the draggled, lame mistress of a drunken home, and looked sixty. Despite her prophecy, her husband had conserved his “habits.” The Poveys ate all the fish they could, and sometimes more than they enjoyed, because on his sober days Hollins invariably started his round at the shop, and Constance had to buy for Maggie’s sake. The worst of the worthless husband was that he seldom failed to be cheery and polite. He never missed asking after the health of Mrs. Baines. And when Constance replied that her mother was “pretty well considering,” but that she would not come over to Bursley again until the Axe railway was opened, as she could not stand the drive, he would shake his grey head and be sympathetically gloomy for an instant.

All these changes in six years! The almanacs were in the right of it.

But nothing had happened to her. Gradually she had obtained a sure ascendancy over her mother, yet without seeking it, merely as the outcome of time’s influences on her and on her mother respectively. Gradually she had gained skill and use in the management of her household and of her share of the shop, so that these machines ran smoothly and effectively and a sudden contretemps no longer frightened her. Gradually she had constructed a

chart of Samuel's individuality, with the submerged rocks and perilous currents all carefully marked, so that she could now voyage unalarmed in those seas. But nothing happened. Unless their visits to Buxton could be called happenings! Decidedly the visit to Buxton was the one little hill that rose out of the level plain of the year. They had formed the annual habit of going to Buxton for ten days. They had a way of saying: "Yes, we always go to Buxton. We went there for our honeymoon, you know." They had become confirmed Buxtonites, with views concerning St. Anne's Terrace, the Broad Walk and Peel's Cavern. They could not dream of deserting their Buxton. It was the sole possible resort. Was it not the highest town in England? Well, then!

At the beginning, the notion of leaving the shop to hired custody had seemed almost fantastic, and the preparations for absence had been very complicated. Then it was that Miss Insull had detached herself from the other young lady assistants as a creature who could be absolutely trusted. Miss Insull was older than Constance; she had a bad complexion, and she was not clever, but she was one of your reliable ones. The six years had witnessed the slow, steady rise of Miss Insull. Her employers said "Miss Insull" in a tone quite different from that in which they said "Miss Hawkins," or "Miss Dadd." "Miss Insull" meant the end of a discussion. "Better tell Miss Insull." "Miss Insull will see to that." "I shall ask Miss Insull." Miss Insull slept in the house ten nights every year. Miss Insull had been called into consultation when it was decided to engage a fourth hand in the shape of an apprentice.

Trade had improved in the point of excellence. It was now admitted to be good—a rare honour for trade! The coal-mining boom was at its height, and colliers, in

addition to getting drunk, were buying American organs and expensive bull-terriers. Often they would come to the shop to purchase cloth for coats for their dogs. And they would have good cloth. Mr. Povey did not like this. One day a butty chose for his dog the best cloth of Mr. Povey's shop—at 12s. a yard. "Will ye make it up? I've gotten th' measurements," asked the collier. "No, I won't!" said Mr. Povey, hotly. "And what's more, I won't sell you the cloth either! Cloth at 12s. a yard on a dog's back indeed! I'll thank you to get out of my shop!" The incident became historic, in the Square.

### III.

Was Constance happy? Of course there was always something on her mind, something that had to be dealt with, either in the shop or in the house, something to employ all the skill and experience which she had acquired. Her life had much in it of laborious tedium—tedium never-ending and monotonous. And both she and Samuel worked consistently hard, rising early, "pushing forward," as the phrase ran, and going to bed early from sheer fatigue; week after week and month after month as season changed imperceptibly into season. In June and July it would happen to them occasionally to retire before the last silver of dusk was out of the sky. They would lie in bed and talk placidly of their daily affairs. There would be a noise in the street below. "Vaults closing!" Samuel would say, and yawn. "Yes, it's quite late," Constance would say. And the Swiss clock would rapidly strike eleven on its coil of resonant wire. And then, just before she went to sleep, Constance might reflect upon her destiny, as even the busiest and smoothest women do, and she would decide that it was kind. Her mother's gradual

decline and lonely life at Axe saddened her. The cards which came now and then at extremely long intervals from Sophia had been the cause of more sorrow than joy. The naïve ecstasies of her girlhood had long since departed—the price paid for experience and self-possession and a true vision of things. The vast inherent melancholy of the universe did not exempt her. But as she went to sleep she would be conscious of a vague contentment. The basis of this contentment was the fact that she and Samuel comprehended and esteemed each other, and made allowances for each other. Their characters had been tested and had stood the test. Affection, love, was not to them a salient phenomenon in their relations. Habit had inevitably dulled its glitter. It was like a flavouring, scarce remarked; but had it been absent, how they would have turned from that dish!

Samuel never, or hardly ever, set himself to meditate upon the problem whether or not life had come up to his expectations. But he had, at times, strange sensations which he did not analyse, and which approached nearer to ecstasy than any feeling of Constance's. Thus, when he was in one of his dark furies, molten within and black without, the sudden thought of his wife's unalterable benignant calm, which nothing could overthrow, might strike him into a wondering cold. For him she was astoundingly feminine. She would put flowers on the mantelpiece, and then, hours afterwards, in the middle of a meal, ask him unexpectedly what he thought of her "garden;" and he gradually divined that a perfunctory reply left her unsatisfied; she wanted a genuine opinion; a genuine opinion mattered to her. Fancy calling flowers on a mantelpiece a "garden!" How charming, how childlike! Then she had a way, on Sunday mornings, when she descended to

the parlour all ready for chapel, of shutting the door at the foot of the stairs with a little bang, shaking herself, and turning round swiftly as if for his inspection, as if saying: "Well, what about this? Will this do?" A phenomenon always associated in his mind with the smell of kid gloves! Invariably she asked him about the colours and cut of her dresses. Would he prefer this, or that? He could not take such questions seriously until one day he happened to hint, merely hint, that he was not a thorough-going admirer of a certain new dress—it was her first new dress after the definite abandonment of crinolines. She never wore it again. He thought she was not serious at first, and remonstrated against a joke being carried too far. She said: "It's not a bit of use you talking, I sha'n't wear it again." And then he so far appreciated her seriousness as to refrain, by discretion, from any comment. The incident affected him for days. It flattered him; it thrilled him; but it baffled him. Strange that a woman subject to such caprices should be so sagacious, capable, and utterly reliable as Constance was! For the practical and commonsense side of her eternally compelled his admiration. The very first example of it—her insistence that the simultaneous absence of both of them from the shop for half an hour or an hour twice a day would not mean the immediate downfall of the business—had remained in his mind ever since. Had she not been obstinate—in her benevolent way—against the old superstition which he had acquired from his employers, they might have been eating separately to that day. Then her handling of her mother during the months of the siege of Paris, when Mrs. Baines was convinced that her sinful daughter was in hourly danger of death, had been extraordinarily fine, he considered.

And the sequel, a card for Constance's birthday, had completely justified her attitude.

Sometimes some blundering fool would jovially exclaim to them:

"What about that baby?"

Or a woman would remark quietly: "I often feel sorry you've no children."

And they would answer that really they did not know what they would do if there was a baby. What with the shop and one thing or another . . .! And they were quite sincere.

#### IV.

It is remarkable what a little thing will draw even the most regular and serious people from the deep groove of their habits. One morning in March, a boneshaker, an affair on two equal wooden wheels joined by a bar of iron, in the middle of which was a wooden saddle, disturbed the gravity of St. Luke's Square. True, it was probably the first boneshaker that had ever attacked the gravity of St. Luke's Square. It came out of the shop of Daniel Povey, the confectioner and baker, and Samuel Povey's celebrated cousin, in Boulton Terrace. Boulton Terrace formed nearly a right angle with the Baines premises, and at the corner of the angle Wedgwood Street and King Street left the Square. The boneshaker was brought forth by Dick Povey, the only son of Daniel, now aged eleven years, under the superintendence of his father, and the Square soon perceived that Dick had a natural talent for breaking-in an untrained boneshaker. After a few attempts he could remain on the back of the machine for at least ten yards, and his feats had the effect of endowing St. Luke's Square with the attractiveness of a

circus. Samuel Povey watched with candid interest from the ambush of his door, while the unfortunate young lady assistants, though aware of the performance that was going on, dared not stir from the stove. Samuel was tremendously tempted to sally out boldly, and chat with his cousin about the toy; he had surely a better right to do so than any other tradesman in the Square, since he was of the family; but his diffidence prevented him from moving. Presently Daniel Povey and Dick went to the top of the Square with the machine, opposite Holl's, and Dick, being carefully installed in the saddle, essayed to descend the gentle paven slopes of the Square. He failed time after time; the machine had an astonishing way of turning round, running uphill, and then lying calmly on its side. At this point of Dick's life-history every shop-door in the Square was occupied by an audience. At last the boneshaker displayed less unwillingness to obey, and lo! in a moment Dick was riding down the Square, and the spectators held their breath as if he had been Blondin crossing Niagara. Every second he ought to have fallen off, but he contrived to keep upright. Already he had accomplished twenty yards—thirty yards! It was a miracle that he was performing! The transit continued, and seemed to occupy hours. And then a faint hope rose in the breast of the watchers that the prodigy might arrive at the bottom of the Square. His speed was increasing with his "knack." But the Square was enormous, boundless. Samuel Povey gazed at the approaching phenomenon as a bird at a serpent, with bulging, beady eyes. The child's speed went on increasing and his path grew straighter. Yes, he would arrive; he would do it! Samuel Povey involuntarily lifted one leg in his nervous tension. And now the hope that Dick would arrive became a fear, as his pace grew still



more rapid. Everybody lifted one leg, and gaped. And the intrepid child surged on, and, finally victorious, crashed into the pavement in front of Samuel at the rate of quite six miles an hour.

Samuel picked him up, unscathed. And somehow this picking up of Dick invested Samuel with importance, gave him a share in the glory of the feat itself.

Daniel Povey came running and joyous. "Not so bad for a start, eh?" exclaimed the great Daniel. Though by no means a simple man, his pride in his offspring sometimes made him a little naïve.

Father and son explained the machine to Samuel, Dick incessantly repeating the exceedingly strange truth that if you felt you were falling to your right you must turn to your right and *vice versa*. Samuel found himself suddenly admitted, as it were, to the inner fellowship of the boneshaker, exalted above the rest of the Square. In another adventure more thrilling events occurred. The fair-haired Dick was one of those dangerous, frenzied madcaps who are born without fear. The secret of the machine had been revealed to him in his recent transit, and he was silently determining to surpass himself. Precariously balanced, he descended the Square again, frowning hard, his teeth set, and actually managed to swerve into King Street. Constance, in the parlour, saw an incomprehensible winged thing fly past the window. The cousins Povey sounded an alarm and protest and ran in pursuit; for the gradient of King Street is, in the strict sense, steep. Half-way down King Street Dick was travelling at twenty miles an hour, and heading straight for the church, as though he meant to disestablish it and perish. The main gate of the churchyard was open, and that affrighting child, with a lunatic's luck, whizzed safely

through the portals into God's acre. The cousins Povey discovered him lying on a green grave, clothed in pride. His first words were: "Dad, did you pick my cap up?" The symbolism of the amazing ride did not escape the Square; indeed, it was much discussed.

This incident led to a friendship between the cousins. They formed a habit of meeting in the Square for a chat. The meetings were the subject of comment, for Samuel's relation's with the greater Daniel had always been of the most distant. It was understood that Samuel disapproved of Mrs. Daniel Povey even more than the majority of people disapproved of her. Mrs. Daniel Povey, however, was away from home; probably, had she not been, Samuel would not even have gone to the length of joining Daniel on the neutral ground of the open Square. But having once broken the ice, Samuel was glad to be on terms of growing intimacy with his cousin. The friendship flattered him, for Daniel, despite his wife, was a figure in a world larger than Samuel's; moreover, it consecrated his position as the equal of no matter what tradesman (apprentice though he had been), and also he genuinely liked and admired Daniel, rather to his own astonishment.

Everyone liked Daniel Povey; he was a favourite among all ranks. The leading confectioner, a member of the Local Board, and a sidesman at St. Luke's, he was, and had been for twenty-five years, very prominent in the town. He was a tall, handsome man, with a trimmed, greying beard, a jolly smile, and a flashing, dark eye. His good humour seemed to be permanent. He had dignity without the slightest stiffness; he was welcomed by his equals and frankly adored by his inferiors. He ought to have been Chief Bailiff, for he was rich enough;

but there intervened a mysterious obstacle between Daniel Povey and the supreme honour, a scarcely tangible impediment which could not be definitely stated. He was capable, honest, industrious, successful, and an excellent speaker; and if he did not belong to the austerer section of society, if, for example, he thought nothing of dropping into the Tiger for a glass of beer, or of using an oath occasionally, or of telling a facetious story—well, in a busy, broad-minded town of thirty thousand inhabitants, such proclivities are no bar whatever to perfect esteem. But—how is one to phrase it without wronging Daniel Povey? He was entirely moral; his views were unexceptionable. The truth is that, for the ruling classes of Bursley, Daniel Povey was just a little too fanatical a worshipper of the god Pan. He was one of the remnant who had kept alive the great Pan tradition from the days of the Regency through the vast, arid Victorian expanse of years. The flighty character of his wife was regarded by many as a judgment upon him for the robust Rabelaisianism of his more private conversation, for his frank interest in, his eternal preoccupation with, aspects of life and human activity which, though essential to the divine purpose, are not openly recognised as such—even by Daniel Poveys. It was not a question of his conduct; it was a question of the cast of his mind. If it did not explain his friendship with the rector of St. Luke's, it explained his departure from the Primitive Methodist connexion, to which the Poveys as a family had belonged since Primitive Methodism was created in Turnhill in 1807.

Daniel Povey had a way of assuming that every male was boiling over with interest in the sacred cult of Pan. The assumption, though sometimes causing inconvenience

at first, usually conquered by virtue of its inherent truthfulness. Thus it fell out with Samuel. Samuel had not suspected that Pan had silken cords to draw him. He had always averted his eyes from the god—that is to say, within reason. Yet now Daniel, on perhaps a couple of fine mornings a week, in full Square, with Fan sitting behind on the cold stones, and Mr. Critchlow ironic at his door in a long white apron, would entertain Samuel Povey for half an hour with Pan's most intimate lore, and Samuel Povey would not blench. He would, on the contrary, stand up to Daniel like a little man, and pretend with all his might to be, potentially, a perfect arch-priest of the god. Daniel taught him a lot; turned over the page of life for him, as it were, and, showing the reverse side, seemed to say: "You were missing all that." Samuel gazed upwards at the handsome long nose and rich lips of his elder cousin, so experienced, so agreeable, so renowned, so esteemed, so philosophic, and admitted to himself that he had lived to the age of forty in a state of comparative boobyism. And then he would gaze downwards at the faint patch of flour on Daniel's right leg, and conceive that life was, and must be, life.

Not many weeks after his initiation into the cult he was startled by Constance's preoccupied face one evening. Now, a husband of six years' standing, to whom it has not happened to become a father, is not easily startled by such a face as Constance wore. Years ago he had frequently been startled, had frequently lived in suspense for a few days. But he had long since grown impervious to these alarms. And now he was startled again—but as a man may be startled who is not altogether surprised at being startled. And seven endless days passed, and Samuel and Constance glanced at each other like guilty

things, whose secret refuses to be kept. Then three more days passed, and another three. Then Samuel Povey remarked, in a firm, masculine, fact-fronting tone:

"Oh, there's no doubt about it!"

And they glanced at each other like conspirators who have lighted a fuse and cannot take refuge in flight. Their eyes said continually, with a delicious, an enchanting mixture of ingenuous modesty and fearful joy:

"Well, we've gone and done it!"

There it was, the incredible, incomprehensible future—coming!

Samuel had never correctly imagined the manner of its heralding. He had imagined in his early simplicity that one day Constance, blushing, might put her mouth to his ear and whisper—something positive. It had not occurred in the least like that. But things are so obstinately, so incurably unsentimental.

"I think we ought to drive over and tell mother, on Sunday," said Constance.

His impulse was to reply, in his grand, offhand style: "Oh, a letter will do!"

But he checked himself and said, with careful deference: "You think that will be better than writing?"

All was changed. He braced every fibre to meet destiny, and to help Constance to meet it.

The weather threatened on Sunday. He went to Axe without Constance. His cousin drove him there in a dog-cart, and he announced that he should walk home, as the exercise would do him good. During the drive Daniel, in whom he had not confided, chattered as usual, and Samuel pretended to listen with the same attitude as usual; but secretly he despised Daniel for a man who

has got something not of the first importance on the brain. His perspective was truer than Daniel's.

He walked home, as he had decided, over the wavy moorland of the county dreaming in the heart of England. Night fell on him in mid-career, and he was tired. But the earth, as it whirled through naked space, whirled up the moon for him, and he pressed on at a good speed. A wind from Arabia wandering cooled his face. And at last, over the brow of Toft End, he saw suddenly the Five Towns a-twinkle on their little hills down in the vast amphitheatre. And one of those lamps was Constance's lamp—one, somewhere. He lived, then. He entered into the shadow of nature. The mysteries made him solemn. What! A boneshaker, his cousin, and then this!

"Well, I'm damned! Well, I'm damned!" he kept repeating, he who never swore.

### CHAPTER III.

#### CYRIL.

##### I.

CONSTANCE stood at the large, many-paned window in the parlour. She was stouter. Although always plump, her figure had been comely, with a neat, well-marked waist. But now the shapeliness had gone; the waist-line no longer existed, and there were no more crinolines to create it artificially. An observer not under the charm of her face might have been excused for calling her fat and lumpy. The face, grave, kind, and expectant, with its radiant, fresh cheeks, and the rounded softness of its curves, atoned for the figure. She was nearly twenty-nine years of age.

It was late in October. In Wedgwood Street, next to Boulton Terrace, all the little brown houses had been pulled down to make room for a palatial covered market, whose foundations were then being dug. This destruction exposed a vast area of sky to the north-east. A great dark cloud with an untidy edge rose massively out of the depths and curtained off the tender blue of approaching dusk; while in the west, behind Constance, the sun was setting in calm and gorgeous melancholy on the Thursday hush of the town. It was one of those afternoons which gather up all the sadness of the moving earth and transform it into beauty.

Samuel Povey turned the corner from Wedgwood Street, and crossed King Street obliquely to the front-door, which Constance opened. He seemed tired and anxious.

"Well?" demanded Constance, as he entered.

"She's no better. There's no getting away from it, she's worse. I should have stayed, only I knew you'd be worrying. So I caught the three-fifty."

"How is that Mrs. Gilchrist shaping as a nurse?"

"She's very good," said Samuel, with conviction. "Very good!"

"What a blessing! I suppose you didn't happen to see the doctor?"

"Yes, I did."

"What did he say to you?"

Samuel gave a deprecating gesture. "Didn't say anything particular. With dropsy, at that stage, you know..."

Constance had returned to the window, her expectancy apparently unappeased.

"I don't like the look of that cloud," she murmured.

"What! Are they out still?" Samuel inquired, taking off his overcoat

"Here they are!" cried Constance. Her features suddenly transfigured, she sprang to the door, pulled it open, and descended the steps.

A perambulator was being rapidly pushed up the slope by a breathless girl.

"Amy," Constance gently protested, "I told you not to venture far."

"I hurried all I could, mum, soon as I seed that cloud," the girl puffed, with the air of one who is seriously thankful to have escaped a great disaster.

Constance dived into the recesses of the perambulator and extricated from its cocoon the centre of the universe, and scrutinised him with quiet passion, and then rushed with him into the house, though not a drop of rain had yet fallen.

"Precious!" exclaimed Amy, in ecstasy, her young virginal eyes following him till he disappeared. Then she wheeled away the perambulator, which now had no more value nor interest than an egg-shell. It was necessary to take it right round to the Brougham Street yard entrance, past the front of the closed shop.

Constance sat down on the horsehair sofa and hugged and kissed her prize before removing his bonnet.

"Here's Daddy!" she said to him, as if imparting strange and rapturous tidings. "Here's Daddy come back from hanging up his coat in the passage! Daddy rubbing his hands!" And then, with a swift transition of voice and features: "Do look at him, Sam!"

Samuel, preoccupied, stooped forward. "Oh, you little scoundrel! Oh, you little scoundrel!" he greeted the baby, advancing his finger towards the baby's nose.

The baby, who had hitherto maintained a passive indifference to external phenomena, lifted elbows and toes,



blew bubbles from his tiny mouth, and stared at the finger with the most ravishing, roguish smile, as though saying: "I know that great sticking-out limb, and there is a joke about it which no one but me can see, and which is my secret joy that you shall never share."

"Tea ready?" Samuel asked, resuming his gravity and his ordinary pose.

"You must give the girl time to take her things off," said Constance. "We'll have the table drawn away from the fire, and baby can lie on his shawl on the hearthrug while we're having tea." Then to the baby, in rapture: "And play with his toys; all his nice, nice toys!"

"You know Miss Insull is staying for tea?"

Constance, her head bent over the baby, who formed a white patch on her comfortable brown frock, nodded without speaking.

Samuel Povey, walking to and fro, began to enter into details of his hasty journey to Axe. Old Mrs. Baines, having beheld her grandson, was preparing to quit this world.

"So that if there is any sudden change they will telegraph," he finished, to Constance.

She raised her head. The words, clinching what had led up to them, drew her from her dream and she saw, for a moment, her mother in an agony.

"But you don't surely mean—?" she began, trying to disperse the painful vision as unjustified by the facts.

"My dear girl," said Samuel, with head singing, and hot eyes, and a consciousness of high tension in every nerve of his body, "I simply mean that if there's any sudden change they will telegraph."

While they had tea, Samuel sitting opposite to his wife, and Miss Insull nearly against the wall (owing to

the moving of the table), the baby rolled about on the hearthrug, which had been covered with a large soft woollen shawl, originally the property of his great-grandmother. He had no cares, no responsibilities. The shawl was so vast that he could not clearly distinguish objects beyond its confines. On it lay an india-rubber ball, an india-rubber doll, a rattle, and fan. He vaguely recollected all four items, with their respective properties. The fire also was an old friend. He had occasionally tried to touch it, but a high bright fence always came in between. For ten months he had never spent a day without making experiments on this shifting universe in which he alone remained firm and stationary. The experiments were chiefly conducted out of idle amusement, but he was serious on the subject of food. Lately the behaviour of the universe in regard to his food had somewhat perplexed him, had indeed annoyed him. However, he was of a forgetful, happy disposition, and so long as the universe continued to fulfil its sole end as a machinery for the satisfaction, somehow, of his imperious desires, he was not inclined to remonstrate. At last he became aware that a face was looking down at his. He recognised it, and immediately an uncomfortable sensation in his stomach disturbed him; he tolerated it for fifty years or so, and then he gave a little cry. Life had resumed its seriousness.

"Black alpaca. B quality. Width 20, t.a. 22 yards," Miss Insull read out of a great book. She and Mr. Povey were checking stock.

And Mr. Povey responded, "Black alpaca B quality. Width 20, t.a. 22 yards. It wants ten minutes yet." He had glanced at the clock.

"Does it?" said Constance, well knowing that it wanted ten minutes.

The baby did not guess that a high invisible god named Samuel Povey, whom nothing escaped, and who could do everything at once, was controlling his universe from an inconceivable distance. On the contrary, the baby was crying to himself, There is no God.

His weaning had reached the stage at which a baby really does not know what will happen next. The annoyance had begun exactly three months after his first tooth, such being the rule of the gods, and it had grown more and more disconcerting. No sooner did he accustom himself to a new phenomenon than it mysteriously ceased, and an old one took its place which he had utterly forgotten. This afternoon his mother nursed him, but not until she had foolishly attempted to divert him from the seriousness of life by means of gewgaws of which he was sick. Still, once at her rich breast, he forgave and forgot all. He preferred her simple, natural breast to more modern inventions. And he had no shame, no modesty. Nor had his mother. It was an indecent carouse at which his father and Miss Insull had to assist. But his father had shame.

Constance blandly offered herself to the child, with the unconscious primitive savagery of a young mother, and as the baby fed, thoughts of her own mother flitted to and fro ceaselessly like vague shapes over the deep sea of content which filled her mind. This illness of her mother's was abnormal, and the baby was now, for the first time perhaps, entirely normal in her consciousness. The baby was something which could be disturbed, not something which did disturb. What a change! What a change that had seemed impossible until its full accomplishment! And all in ten months!

When the baby was installed in his cot for the night,

she came downstairs and found Miss Insull and Samuel still working, and harder than ever, but at addition sums now. She sat down, leaving the door open at the foot of the stairs. She had embroidery in hand: a cap. And while Miss Insull and Samuel combined pounds, shillings, and pence, whispering at great speed, she bent over the delicate, intimate, wasteful handiwork, drawing the needle with slow exactitude. Then she would raise her head and listen.

"Excuse me," said Miss Insull, "I think I hear baby crying."

"And two are eight and three are eleven. He must cry," said Mr. Povey, rapidly, without looking up.

The baby's parents did not make a practice of discussing their domestic existence even with Miss Insull; but Constance had to justify herself as a mother.

"I've made perfectly sure he's comfortable," said Constance. "He's only crying because he fancies he's neglected. And we think he can't begin too early to learn."

"How right you are!" said Miss Insull. "Two and carry three."

That distant, feeble, querulous, pitiful cry continued obstinately. It continued for thirty minutes. Constance could not proceed with her work. The cry disintegrated her will, dissolved her hard sagacity.

Without a word she crept upstairs, having carefully deposed the cap on her rocking-chair.

Mr. Povey hesitated a moment and then bounded up after her, startling Fan. He shut the door on Miss Insull, but Fan was too quick for him. He saw Constance with her hand on the bedroom door.

"My dear girl," he protested, holding himself in. "Now what *are* you going to do?"

"I'm just listening," said Constance.

"Do be reasonable and come downstairs."

He spoke in a low voice, scarcely masking his nervous irritation, and tiptoed along the corridor towards her and up the two steps past the gas-burner. Fan followed, wagging her tail expectant.

"Suppose he's not well?" Constance suggested.

"Pshaw!" Mr. Povey exclaimed contemptuously. "You remember what happened last night and what you said!"

They argued, subduing their tones to the false semblance of good-will, there in the closeness of the corridor. Fan, deceived, ceased to wag her tail and then trotted away. The baby's cry, behind the door, rose to a mysterious despairing howl, which had such an effect on Constance's heart that she could have walked through fire to reach the baby. But Mr. Povey's will held her. And she rebelled, angry, hurt, resentful. Commonsense, the ideal of mutual forbearance, had winged away from that excited pair. It would have assuredly ended in a quarrel, with Samuel glaring at her in black fury from the other side of a bottomless chasm, had not Miss Insull most surprisingly burst up the stairs.

Mr. Povey turned to face her, swallowing his emotion.

"A telegram!" said Miss Insull. "The postmaster brought it down himself—"

"What? Mr. Derry?" asked Samuel, opening the telegram with an affectation of majesty.

"Yes. He said it was too late for delivery by rights. But as it seemed very important . . ."

Samuel scanned it and nodded gravely; then gave it to his wife. Tears came into her eyes.

"I'll get Cousin Daniel to drive me over at once," said Samuel, master of himself and of the situation.

"Wouldn't it be better to hire?" Constance suggested. She had a prejudice against Daniel.

Mr. Povey shook his head. "He offered," he replied. "I can't refuse his offer."

"Put your thick overcoat on, dear," said Constance, in a dream, descending with him.

"I hope it isn't—" Miss Insull stopped.

"Yes, it is, Miss Insull," said Samuel, deliberately.

In less than a minute he was gone.

Constance ran upstairs. But the cry had ceased. She turned the door-knob softly, slowly, and crept into the chamber. A night-light made large shadows among the heavy mahogany and the crimson, tasselled rep in the close-curtained room. And between the bed and the ottoman (on which lay Samuel's newly-bought family Bible) the cot loomed in the shadows. She picked up the night-light and stole round the bed. Yes, he had decided to fall asleep. The hazard of death afar off had just defeated his devilish obstinacy. Fate had bested him. How marvellously soft and delicate that tear-stained cheek! How frail that tiny, tiny clenched hand! In Constance grief and joy were mystically united.

## II.

The drawing-room was full of visitors, in frocks of ceremony. The old drawing-room, but newly and massively arranged with the finest Victorian furniture from dead Aunt Harriet's house at Axe; two "Canterburys," a large bookcase, a splendid scintillant table solid beyond lifting, intricately tortured chairs and armchairs! The original furniture of the drawing-room was now down in the parlour, making it grand. All the house breathed opulence; it was gorged with quiet, restrained expensive-

ness; the least considerable objects, in the most modest corners, were what Mrs. Baines would have termed "good." Constance and Samuel had half of all Aunt Harriet's money and half of Mrs. Baines's; the other half was accumulating for a hypothetical Sophia, Mr. Critchlow being the trustee. The business continued to flourish. People knew that Samuel Povey was buying houses. Yet Samuel and Constance had not made friends; they had not, in the Five Towns phrase, "branched out socially," though they had very meetly branched out on subscription lists. They kept themselves to themselves (emphasising the preposition). These guests were not their guests; they were the guests of Cyril.

He had been named Samuel because Constance would have him named after his father, and Cyril because his father secretly despised the name of Samuel; and he was called Cyril; "Master Cyril," by Amy, definite successor to Maggie. His mother's thoughts were on Cyril as long as she was awake. His father, when not planning Cyril's welfare, was earning money whose unique object could be nothing but Cyril's welfare. Cyril was the pivot of the house; every desire ended somewhere in Cyril. The shop existed now solely for him. And those houses that Samuel bought by private treaty, or with a shamefaced air at auctions—somehow they were aimed at Cyril. Samuel and Constance had ceased to be self-justifying beings; they never thought of themselves save as the parents of Cyril.

They realised this by no means fully. Had they been accused of monomania they would have smiled the smile of people confident in their commonsense and their mental balance. Nevertheless, they were monomaniacs. Instinctively they concealed the fact as much as possible.

They never admitted it even to themselves. Samuel, indeed, would often say: "That child is not everybody. That child must be kept in his place." Constance was always teaching him consideration for his father as the most important person in the household. Samuel was always teaching him consideration for his mother as the most important person in the household. Nothing was left undone to convince him that he was a cipher, a nonentity, who ought to be very glad to be alive. But he knew all about his importance. He knew that the entire town was his. He knew that his parents were deceiving themselves. Even when he was punished he well knew that it was because he was so important. He never imparted any portion of this knowledge to his parents; a primeval wisdom prompted him to retain it strictly in his own bosom.

He was four and a half years old, dark, like his father; handsome, like his aunt, and tall for his age; not one of his features resembled a feature of his mother's, but sometimes he "had her look." From the capricious production of inarticulate sounds, and then a few monosyllables that described concrete things and obvious desires, he had gradually acquired an astonishing idiomatic command over the most difficult of Teutonic languages; there was nothing that he could not say. He could walk and run, was full of exact knowledge about God, and entertained no doubt concerning the special partiality of a minor deity called Jesus towards himself.

Now, this party was his mother's invention and scheme. His father, after flouting it, had said that if it was to be done at all, it should be done well, and had brought to the doing all his organising skill. Cyril had accepted it at first—merely accepted it; but, as the day approached



and the preparations increased in magnitude, he had come to look on it with favour, then with enthusiasm. His father having taken him to Daniel Povey's opposite, to choose cakes, he had shown, by his solemn and fastidious waverings, how seriously he regarded the affair.

Of course it had to occur on a Thursday afternoon. The season was summer, suitable for pale and fragile toilettes. And the eight children who sat round Aunt Harriet's great table glittered like the sun. Not Constance's specially provided napkins could hide that wealth and profusion of white lace and stitchery. Never in after-life are the genteel children of the Five Towns so richly clad as at the age of four or five years. Weeks of labour, thousands of cubic feet of gas, whole nights stolen from repose, eyesight, and general health, will disappear into the manufacture of a single frock that accidental jam may ruin in ten seconds. Thus it was in those old days; and thus it is to-day. Cyril's guests ranged in years from four to six; they were chiefly older than their host; this was a pity, it impaired his importance; but up to four years a child's sense of propriety, even of common decency, is altogether too unreliable for a respectable party.

Round about the outskirts of the table were the elders, ladies the majority; they also in their best, for they had to meet each other. Constance displayed a new dress, of crimson silk; after having mourned for her mother she had definitely abandoned the black which, by reason of her duties in the shop, she had constantly worn from the age of sixteen to within a few months of Cyril's birth; she never went into the shop now, except casually, on brief visits of inspection. She was still fat; the destroyer of her figure sat at the head of the table. Samuel kept close to her: he was the only male, until Mr. Critchlow astonish-

ingly arrived; among the company Mr. Critchlow had a grand-niece. Samuel, if not in his best, was certainly not in his everyday suit. With his large frilled shirt-front, and small black tie, and his little black beard and dark face over that, he looked very nervous and self-conscious. He had not the habit of entertaining. Nor had Constance; but her benevolence ever bubbling up to the calm surface of her personality made self-consciousness impossible for her. Miss Insull was also present, in shop-black, "to help." Lastly there was Amy, now as the years passed slowly assuming the character of a faithful retainer, though she was only twenty-three. An ugly, abrupt, downright girl, with convenient notions of pleasure! For she would rise early and retire late in order to contrive an hour to go out with Master Cyril; and to be allowed to put Master Cyril to bed was, really, her highest bliss.

All these elders were continually inserting arms into the fringe of fluffy children that surrounded the heaped table; removing dangerous spoons out of cups into saucers, replacing plates, passing cakes, spreading jam, whispering consolations, explanations, and sage counsel. Mr. Critchlow, snow-white now but unbent, remarked that there was "a pretty cackle," and he sniffed. Although the window was slightly open, the air was heavy with the natural human odour which young children transpire. More than one mother, pressing her nose into a lacy mass, to whisper, inhaled that pleasant perfume with a voluptuous thrill.

Cyril, while attending steadily to the demands of his body, was in a mood which approached the ideal. Proud and radiant, he combined urbanity with a certain fine condescension. His bright eyes, and his manner of scraping up jam with a spoon, said: "I am the king of this party. This party is solely in my honour. I know that.

We all know it. Still, I will pretend that we are equals, you and I." He talked about his picture-books to a young woman on his right named Jennie, aged four, pale, pretty, the belle in fact, and Mr. Critchlow's grand-niece. The boy's attractiveness was indisputable; he could put on quite an aristocratic air. It was the most delicious sight to see them, Cyril and Jennie, so soft and delicate, so infantile on their piles of cushions and books, with their white socks and black shoes dangling far distant from the carpet; and yet so old, so self-contained! And they were merely an epitome of the whole table.

Someone, some officious relative of a visitor, began to pass a certain cake which had brown walls, a roof of cocoa-nut icing, and a yellow body studded with crimson globules. Not a conspicuously gorgeous cake, not a cake to which a catholic child would be likely to attach particular importance; a good, average cake! Who could have guessed that it stood, in Cyril's esteem, as the cake of cakes? He had insisted on his father buying it at Cousin Daniel's, and perhaps Samuel ought to have divined that for Cyril that cake was the gleam that an ardent spirit would follow through the wilderness. Samuel, however, was not a careful observer, and seriously lacked imagination. Constance knew only that Cyril had mentioned the cake once or twice. Now by the hazard of destiny that cake found much favour, helped into popularity as it was by the blundering officious relative who, not dreaming what volcano she was treading on, urged its merits with simpering enthusiasm. One boy took two slices, a slice in each hand; he happened to be the visitor of whom the cake-distributor was a relative, and she protested; she expressed the shock she suffered. Whereupon both Constance and Samuel sprang forward and swore with angelic smiles that

nothing could be more perfect than the propriety of that dear little fellow taking two slices of that cake. It was this hullabaloo that drew Cyril's attention to the evanescence of the cake of cakes. His face at once changed from calm pride to a dreadful anxiety. His eyes bulged out. His tiny mouth grew and grew, like a mouth in a nightmare. He was no longer human; he was a cake-eating tiger being balked of his prey. Nobody noticed him. The officious fool of a woman persuaded Jennie to take the last slice of the cake, which was quite a thin slice.

Then everyone simultaneously noticed Cyril, for he gave a yell. It was not the cry of a despairing soul who sees his beautiful iridescent dream shattered at his feet; it was the cry of the strong, masterful spirit, furious. He turned upon Jennie, sobbing, and snatched at her cake. Unaccustomed to such behaviour from hosts, and being besides a haughty put-you-in-your-place beauty of the future, Jennie defended her cake. After all, it was not she who had taken two slices at once. Cyril hit her in the eye, and then crammed most of the slice of cake into his enormous mouth. He could not swallow it, nor even masticate it, for his throat was rigid and tight. So the cake projected from his red lips, and big tears watered it. The most awful mess you can conceive! Jennie wept loudly, and one or two others joined her in sympathy, but the rest went on eating tranquilly, unmoved by the horror which transfixed their elders.

A host to snatch food from a guest! A host to strike a guest! A gentleman to strike a lady!

Constance whipped up Cyril from his chair and flew with him to his own room (once Samuel's), where she smacked him on the arm and told him he was a very, very naughty boy and that she didn't know what his

father would say. She took the food out of his disgusting mouth—or as much of it as she could get at—and then she left him, on the bed. Miss Jennie was still in tears when, blushing scarlet and trying to smile, Constance returned to the drawing-room. Jennie would not be appeased. Happily Jennie's mother (being about to present Jennie with a little brother—she hoped) was not present. Miss Insull had promised to see Jennie home, and it was decided that she should go. Mr. Critchlow, in high sardonic spirits, said that he would go too; the three departed together, heavily charged with Constance's love and apologies. Then all pretended, and said loudly, that what had happened was nought, that such things were always happening at children's parties. And visitors' relatives asseverated that Cyril was a perfect darling and that really Mrs. Povey must not . . .

"I thought you said that boy was in his bedroom," said Samuel to Constance, coming into the parlour when the last guest had gone. Each avoided the other's eyes.

"Yes, isn't he?"

"No."

"The little jockey!" ("Jockey," an essay in the playful, towards making light of the jockey's sin!) "I expect he's been in search of Amy."

She went to the top of the kitchen stairs and called out: "Amy, is Master Cyril down there?"

"Master Cyril? No, mum. But he was in the parlour a bit ago, after the first and second lot had gone. I told him to go upstairs and be a good boy."

Not for a few moments did the suspicion enter the minds of Samuel and Constance that Cyril might be missing, that the house might not contain Cyril. But having once entered, the suspicion became a certainty.

Amy, cross-examined, burst into sudden tears, admitting that the side-door might have been open when, having sped "the second lot," she criminally left Cyril alone in the parlour in order to descend for an instant to her kitchen. Dusk was gathering. Amy saw the defenceless innocent wandering about all night in the deserted streets of a great city. A similar vision with precise details of canals, tramcar-wheels, and cellar-flaps, disturbed Constance. Samuel said that anyhow he could not have got far, that someone was bound to remark and recognise him, and restore him. "Yes, of course," thought sensible Constance. "But supposing—"

They all three searched the entire house again. Then, in the drawing-room (which was in a sad condition of anticlimax) Amy exclaimed:

"Eh, master! There's town-crier crossing the Square. Hadn't ye better have him cried?"

"Run out and stop him," Constance commanded.

And Amy flew.

Samuel and the aged town-crier parleyed at the side-door, the women in the background.

"I canna' cry him without my bell," drawled the crier, stroking his shabby uniform. "My bell's at wum (home). I mun go and fetch my bell. Yo' write it down on a bit o' paper for me so as I can read it, and I'll foot off for my bell. Folk wouldna' listen to me if I hadna' gotten my bell."

Thus was Cyril cried.

Very shortly afterwards, Samuel Povey came into the kitchen by the underground passage which led past the two cellars to the yard and to Brougham Street. He was carrying in his arms an obscene black mass. This mass was Cyril, once white.

Constance screamed. She was at liberty to give way to her feelings, because Amy happened to be upstairs.

"Stand away!" cried Mr. Povey. "He isn't fit to touch."

And Mr. Povey made as if to pass directly onward, ignoring the mother.

"Wherever did you find him?"

"I found him in the far cellar," said Mr. Povey, compelled to stop, after all. "He was down there with me yesterday, and it just occurred to me that he might have gone there again."

"What! All in the dark?"

"He'd lighted a candle, if you please! I'd left a candlestick and a box of matches handy because I hadn't finished that shelving."

"Well!" Constance murmured. "I can't think how ever he dared go there all alone!"

"Can't you?" said Mr. Povey, cynically. "I can. He simply did it to frighten us."

"Oh, Cyril!" Constance admonished the child. "Cyril!"

The child showed no emotion. His face was an enigma. It might have hidden sullenness or mere callous indifference, or a perfect unconsciousness of sin.

"Give him to me," said Constance.

"I'll look after him this evening," said Samuel, grimly.

"But you can't wash him," said Constance, her relief yielding to apprehension.

"Why not?" demanded Mr. Povey. And he moved off.

"But Sam—"

"I'll look after him, I tell you!" Mr. Povey repeated, threateningly.

"But what are you going to do?" Constance asked with fear.

"Well," said Mr. Povey, "has this sort of thing got to be dealt with, or hasn't it?" He departed upstairs.

Constance overtook him at the door of Cyril's bedroom.

Mr. Povey did not wait for her to speak. His eyes were blazing.

"See here!" he admonished her cruelly. "You get away downstairs, mother!"

And he disappeared into the bedroom with his vile and helpless victim.

A moment later he popped his head out of the door. Constance was disobeying him. He stepped into the passage and shut the door so that Cyril should not hear.

"Now please do as I tell you," he hissed at his wife. "Don't let's have a scene, please."

After about an hour Mr. Povey at last reappeared. Constance was trying to count silver tea-spoons in the parlour.

"He's in bed now," said Mr. Povey, with a magnificent attempt to be nonchalant. "You mustn't go near him."

"But have you washed him?" Constance whimpered.

"I've washed him," replied the astonishing Mr. Povey.

"What have you done to him?"

"I've punished him, of course," said Mr. Povey, like a god who is above human weakness. "What did you expect me to do? *Someone* had to do it."

Constance wiped her eyes with the edge of the white apron which she was wearing over her new silk dress. She surrendered; she accepted the situation; she made the best of it. And all the evening was spent in dismally and horribly pretending that their hearts were beating as one. Mr. Povey's elaborate, cheery kindness was extremely painful.

They went to bed, and in their bedroom Constance,



as she stood close to Samuel, suddenly dropped the pretence, and with eyes and voice of anguish said:

"You must let me look at him."

They faced each other. For a brief instant Cyril did not exist for Constance. Samuel alone obsessed her, and yet Samuel seemed a strange, unknown man. It was in Constance's life one of those crises when the human soul seems to be on the very brink of mysterious and disconcerting cognitions, and then the wave recedes as inexplicably as it surged up.

"Why, of course!" said Mr. Povey, turning away lightly, as though to imply that she was making tragedies out of nothing.

She gave an involuntary gesture of almost childish relief.

Cyril slept calmly. It was a triumph for Mr. Povey.

Constance could not sleep. As she lay darkly awake by her husband, her secret being seemed to be a-quiver with emotion. Not exactly sorrow; not exactly joy; an emotion more elemental than these! A sensation of the intensity of her life in that hour; troubling, anxious, yet not sad! She said that Samuel was quite right, quite right. And then she said that the poor little thing wasn't yet five years old, and that it was monstrous. The two had to be reconciled. And they never could be reconciled. Always she would be between them, to reconcile them, and to be crushed by their impact. Always she would have to bear the burden of both of them. There could be no ease for her, no surcease from a tremendous pre-occupation and responsibility. She could not change Samuel; besides, he was right! And though Cyril was not yet five, she felt that she could not change Cyril either. He was just as unchangeable as a growing plant.

The thought of her mother and Sophia did not present itself to her; she felt, however, somewhat as Mrs. Baines had felt on historic occasions; but, being more softly kind, younger, and less chafed by destiny, she was conscious of no bitterness, conscious rather of a solemn blessedness.

## CHAPTER IV.

## CRIME.

## I.

"Now, Master Cyril," Amy protested, "will you leave that fire alone? It's not you that can mend my fires."

A boy of nine, great and heavy for his years, with a full face and very short hair, bent over the smoking grate. It was about five minutes to eight on a chilly morning after Easter. Amy, hastily clad in blue, with a rough brown apron, was setting the breakfast table. The boy turned his head, still bending.

"Shut up, Ame," he replied, smiling. Life being short, he usually called her Ame when they were alone together. "Or I'll catch you one in the eye with the poker."

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself," said Amy. "And you know your mother told you to wash your feet this morning, and you haven't done. Fine clothes is all very well, but—"

"Who says I haven't washed my feet?" asked Cyril, guiltily.

Amy's mention of fine clothes referred to the fact that he was that morning wearing his Sunday suit for the first time on a week-day.

"I say you haven't," said Amy.

She was more than three times his age still, but they had been treating each other as intellectual equals for years.

"And how do you know?" asked Cyril, tired of the fire.

"I know," said Amy.

"Well, you just don't, then!" said Cyril. "And what about *your* feet? I should be sorry to see your feet, Ame."

Amy was excusably annoyed. She tossed her head. "My feet are as clean as yours any day," she said. "And I shall tell your mother."

But he would not leave her feet alone, and there ensued one of those endless monotonous altercations on a single theme which occur so often between intellectual equals when one is a young son of the house and the other an established servant who adores him. Refined minds would have found the talk disgusting, but the sentiment of disgust seemed to be unknown to either of the wranglers. At last, when Amy by superior tactics had cornered him, Cyril said suddenly:

"Oh, go to hell!"

Amy banged down the spoon for the bacon gravy. "Now I shall tell your mother. Mark my words, this time I *shall* tell your mother."

Cyril felt that in truth he had gone rather far. He was perfectly sure that Amy would not tell his mother. And yet, supposing that by some freak of her nature she did! The consequences would be unutterable; the consequences would more than extinguish his private glory in the use of such a dashing word. So he laughed, a rather silly, giggling laugh, to reassure himself.

"You daren't," he said.

"Daren't I?" she said grimly. "You'll see. *I* don't know where you learn! It fair beats me. But it isn't Amy Bates as is going to be sworn at. As soon as ever your mother comes into this room!"

The door at the foot of the stairs creaked and Constance came into the room. She was wearing a dress of majenta merino, and a gold chain descended from her neck over her rich bosom. She had scarcely aged in five years. It would have been surprising if she had altered much, for the years had passed over her head at an incredible rate. To her it appeared only a few months since Cyril's first and last party.

"Are you all ready, my pet? Let me look at you." Constance greeted the boy with her usual bright, soft energy.

Cyril glanced at Amy, who averted her head, putting spoons into three saucers.

"Yes, mother," he replied in a new voice.

"Did you do what I told you?"

"Yes, mother," he said simply.

"That's right."

Amy made a faint noise with her lips, and departed.

He was saved once more. He said to himself that never again would he permit his soul to be disturbed by any threat of old Ame's.

Constance's hand descended into her pocket and drew out a hard paper packet, which she clapped onto her son's head.

"Oh, mother!" He pretended that she had hurt him, and then he opened the packet. It contained Congleton butter-scotch, reputed a harmless sweetmeat.

"Good!" he cried, "good! Oh! Thanks, mother."

"Now don't begin eating them at once."

"Just one, mother."

"No! And how often have I told you to keep your feet off that fender. See how it's bent. And it's nobody but you."

"Sorry."

"It's no use being sorry if you persist in doing it."

"Oh, mother, I had such a funny dream!"

They chatted until Amy came up the stairs with tea and bacon. The fire had developed from black to clear red.

"Run and tell father that breakfast is ready."

After a little delay a spectacled man of fifty, short and stoutish, with grey hair and a small beard half grey and half black, entered from the shop. Samuel had certainly very much aged, especially in his gestures, which, however, were still quick. He sat down at once—his wife and son were already seated—and served the bacon with the rapid assurance of one who needs not to inquire about tastes and appetites. Not a word was said, except a brief grace by Samuel. But there was no restraint. Samuel had a mild, benignant air. Constance's eyes were a fountain of cheerfulness. The boy sat between them and ate steadily.

Mysterious creature, this child, mysteriously growing and growing in the house! To his mother he was a delicious joy at all times save when he disobeyed his father. But now for quite a considerable period there had been no serious collision. The boy seemed to be acquiring virtue as well as sense. And really he was charming. So big, truly enormous (everyone remarked on it), and yet graceful, lithe, with a smile that could ravish. And he was distinguished in his bearing. Without depreciating Samuel in her faithful heart, Constance saw plainly the singular differences between Samuel and the boy. Save that he was dark, and that his father's "dangerous look" came into those childish eyes occasionally, Cyril had now scarcely any obvious resemblance to his father. He was a Baines. This naturally deepened Constance's family pride. Yes, he was mysterious to

Constance, though probably not more so than any other boy to any other parent. He was equally mysterious to Samuel, but otherwise Mr. Povey had learned to regard him in the light of a parcel which he was always attempting to wrap up in a piece of paper imperceptibly too small. When he successfully covered the parcel at one corner it burst out at another, and this went on for ever, and he could never get the string on. Nevertheless, Mr. Povey had unabated confidence in his skill as a parcel-wrapper. The boy was strangely subtle at times, but then at times he was astoundingly ingenuous, and then his dodges would not deceive the dullest. Mr. Povey knew himself more than a match for his son. He was proud of him because he regarded him as not an ordinary boy; he took it as a matter of course that his boy should not be an ordinary boy. He never, or very rarely, praised Cyril. Cyril thought of his father as a man who, in response to any request, always began by answering with a thoughtful, serious "No, I'm afraid not."

"So you haven't lost your appetite!" his mother commented.

Cyril grinned. "Did you expect me to, mother?"

"Let me see," said Samuel, as if vaguely recalling an unimportant fact. "It's to-day you begin to go to school, isn't it?"

"I wish father wouldn't be such a chump!" Cyril reflected. And, considering that this commencement of school (real school, not a girls' school, as once) had been the chief topic in the house for days, weeks; considering that it now occupied and filled all hearts, Cyril's reflection was excusable.

"Now, there's one thing you must always remember, my boy," said Mr. Povey. "Promptness. Never be late

either in going to school or in coming home. And in order that you may have no excuse"—Mr. Povey pressed on the word "excuse," as though condemning Cyril in advance—"here's something for you!" He said the last words quickly, with a sort of modest shame.

It was a silver watch and chain.

Cyril was staggered. So also was Constance, for Mr. Povey could keep his own counsel.

The watch killed its owner's appetite dead.

Routine was ignored that morning. Father did not go back into the shop. At length the moment came when father put on his hat and overcoat to take Cyril, and Cyril's watch and satchel, to the Endowed School, which had quarters in the Wedgwood Institution close by. A solemn departure, and Cyril could not pretend by his demeanour that it was not! Constance desired to kiss him, but refrained. He would not have liked it. She watched them from the window. Cyril was nearly as tall as his father; that is to say, not nearly as tall, but creeping up his father's shoulder. She felt that the eyes of the town must be on the pair. She was very happy, and nervous.

At dinner-time a triumph seemed probable, and at tea-time, when Cyril came home under a mortar-board hat and with a satchel full of new books and a head full of new ideas, the triumph was actually and definitely achieved. He had been put into the third form, and he announced that he should soon be at the top of it. He was enchanted with the life of school; he liked the other boys, and it appeared that the other boys liked him. The fact was that, with a new silver watch and a packet of sweets, he had begun his new career in the most advantageous circumstances. Moreover, he possessed qualities

which ensure success at school. He was big, and easy, with a captivating smile and a marked aptitude to learn those things which boys insist on teaching to their new comrades. He had muscle, a brave demeanour, and no conceit.

During tea the parlour began to accustom itself to a new vocabulary, containing such words as "fellows," "kept in," "lines," "rot," "recess," "jolly." To some of these words the parents, especially Mr. Povey, had an instinct to object, but they could not object, somehow they did not seem to get an opportunity to object; they were carried away on the torrent, and after all, their excitement and pleasure in the exceeding romantic novelty of existence were just as intense and nearly as ingenuous as their son's.

He demonstrated that unless he was allowed to stay up later than aforetime he would not be able to do his home-work, and hence would not keep that place in the school to which his talents entitled him. Mr. Povey suggested, but only with half a heart, that he should get up earlier in the morning. The proposal fell flat. Everybody knew and admitted that nothing save the scorpions of absolute necessity, or a tremendous occasion such as that particular morning's, would drive Cyril from his bed until the smell of bacon rose to him from the kitchen. The parlour table was consecrated to his lessons. It became generally known that "Cyril was doing his lessons."

When they were done, and Cyril had wiped his fingers on bits of blotting-paper, and his father had expressed qualified approval and had gone into the shop, Cyril said to his mother, with that delicious hesitation which overtook him sometimes:

"Mother."

"Well, my pet."

*The Old Wives' Tale. I.*



"I want you to do something for me."

"Well, what is it?"

"No, you must promise."

"I'll do it if I can."

"But you *can*. It isn't doing. It's *not* doing."

"Come, Cyril, out with it."

"I don't want you to come in and look at me after I'm asleep any more."

"But, you silly boy, what difference can it make to you if you're asleep?"

"I don't want you to. It's like as if I was a baby. You'll *have* to stop doing it some day, and so you may as well stop now."

It was thus that he meant to turn his back on his youth.

She smiled. She was incomprehensibly happy. She continued to smile.

"Now you'll promise, won't you, mother?"

She rapped him on the head with her thimble, lovingly. He took the gesture for consent.

"You are a baby," she murmured.

"Now I shall *trust* you," he said, ignoring this. "Say 'honour bright.'"

"Honour bright."

With what a long caress her eyes followed him, as he went up to bed on his great sturdy legs! She was thankful that school had not contaminated her adorable innocent. If she could have been Ame for twenty-four hours, she perhaps would not have hesitated to put butter into his mouth lest it should melt.

## II.

Nobody really thought that this almost ideal condition of things would persist: an enterprise commenced in such glory must surely traverse periods of difficulty and even of temporary disaster. But no! Cyril seemed to be made specially for school. Before Mr. Povey and Constance had quite accustomed themselves to being the parents of "a great lad," before Cyril had broken the glass of his miraculous watch more than once, the summer term had come to an end and there arrived the excitations of the prize-giving, as it was called; for at that epoch the smaller schools had not found the effrontery to dub the breaking-up ceremony a "speech-day." This prize-giving furnished a particular joy to Mr. and Mrs. Povey. Although the prizes were notoriously few in number—partly to add to their significance, and partly to diminish their cost (the foundation was poor)—Cyril won a prize, a box of geometrical instruments of precision; also he reached the top of his form, and was marked for promotion to the formidable Fourth. Samuel and Constance were bidden to the large hall of the Wedgwood Institution of a summer afternoon, and they saw the whole Board of Governors raised on a rostrum, and in the middle, in front of what he referred to, in his aristocratic London accent, as "a beggarly array of rewards," the aged and celebrated Sir Thomas Wilbraham Wilbraham, ex-M.P., last respectable member of his ancient line. And Sir Thomas gave the box of instruments to Cyril, and shook hands with him. And everybody was very well dressed. Samuel, who had never attended anything but a National School, recalled the simple rigours of his own boyhood, and swelled. For certainly, of all the parents present, he was among the

richest. When, in the informal promiscuities which followed the prize distribution, Cyril joined his father and mother, sheepishly, they duly did their best to make light of his achievements, and failed. The walls of the hall were covered with specimens of the pupils' skill, and the headmaster was observed to direct the attention of the mighty to a map done by Cyril. Of course it was a map of Ireland, Ireland being the map chosen by every map-drawing schoolboy who is free to choose. For a third-form boy it was considered a masterpiece. In the shading of mountains Cyril was already a prodigy. Never, it was said, had the Macgillicuddy Reeks been indicated by a member of that school with a more amazing subtle refinement than by the young Povey.

The fame of this map, added to the box of compasses and Cyril's own desire, pointed to an artistic career. Cyril had always drawn and daubed, and the drawing-master of the Endowed School, who was also headmaster of the Art School, had suggested that the youth should attend the Art School one night a week. Samuel, however, would not listen to the idea; Cyril was too young. It is true that Cyril was too young, but Samuel's real objection was to Cyril's going out alone in the evening. On that he was adamant.

The Governors had recently made the discovery that a sports department was necessary to a good school, and had rented a field for cricket, football, and rounders up at Bleakridge, an innovation which demonstrated that the town was moving with the rapid times. In June this field was open after school hours till eight p.m. as well as on Saturdays. The Squire learnt that Cyril had a talent for cricket, and Cyril wished to practise in the evenings, and was quite ready to bind himself with Bible oaths to rise

at no matter what hour in the morning for the purpose of home lessons. He scarcely expected his father to say "Yes," as his father never did say "Yes," but he was obliged to ask. Samuel nonplussed him by replying that on fine evenings, when he could spare time from the shop, he would go up to Bleakridge with his son. Cyril did not like this in the least. Still, it might be tried. One evening they went, actually, in the new steamcar which had superseded the old horse-cars, and which travelled all the way to Longshaw, a place that Cyril had only heard of. Samuel talked of the games played in the Five Towns in his day, of the Titanic sport of prison-bars, when the team of one "bank" went forth to the challenge of another "bank," preceded by a drum-and-fife band, and when, in the heat of the chase, a man might jump into the canal to escape his pursuer; Samuel had never played at cricket.

Samuel, with a very young grandson of Fan (deceased), sat in dignity on the grass and watched his cricketer for an hour and a half (while Constance kept an eye on the shop and superintended its closing). Samuel then conducted Cyril home again. Two days later the father of his own accord offered to repeat the experience. Cyril refused. Disagreeable insinuations that he was a baby in arms had been made at school in the meantime.

Nevertheless, in other directions Cyril sometimes surprisingly conquered. For instance, he came home one day with the information that a dog that was not a bull-terrier was not worth calling a dog. Fan's grandson had been carried off in earliest prime by a chicken-bone that had pierced his vitals, and Cyril did indeed persuade his father to buy a bull-terrier. The animal was a superlative of forbidding ugliness, but father and son vied with

each other in stern critical praise of his surpassing beauty, and Constance, from good nature, joined in the pretence. He was called Lion, and the shop, after one or two untoward episodes, was absolutely closed to him.

But the most striking of Cyril's successes had to do with the question of the annual holiday. He spoke of the sea soon after becoming a schoolboy. It appeared that his complete ignorance of the sea prejudicially affected him at school. Further, he had always loved the sea; he had drawn hundreds of three-masted ships with studding-sails set, and knew the difference between a brig and a brigantine. When he first said: "I say, mother, why can't we go to Llandudno instead of Buxton this year?" his mother thought he was out of his senses. For the idea of going to any place other than Buxton was inconceivable! Had they not always been to Buxton? What would their landlady say? How could they ever look her in the face again? Besides . . . well . . .! They went to Llandudno, rather scared, and hardly knowing how the change had come about. But they went. And it was the force of Cyril's will, Cyril the theoretic cypher, that took them.

### III.

The removal of the Endowed School to more commodious premises in the shape of Shawport Hall, an ancient mansion with fifty rooms and five acres of land round about it, was not a change that quite pleased Samuel or Constance. They admitted the hygienic advantages, but Shawport Hall was three-quarters of a mile distant from St. Luke's Square—in the hollow that separates Bursley from its suburb of Hillport; whereas the Wedgwood Institution was scarcely a minute away. It

was as if Cyril, when he set off to Shawport Hall of a morning, passed out of their sphere of influence. He was leagues off, doing they knew not what. Further, his dinner-hour was cut short by the extra time needed for the journey to and fro, and he arrived late for tea; it may be said that he often arrived very late for tea; the whole machinery of the meal was disturbed. These matters seemed to Samuel and Constance to be of tremendous import, seemed to threaten the very foundations of existence. Then they grew accustomed to the new order, and wondered sometimes, when they passed the Wedgwood Institution and the insalubrious Cock Yard—once sole playground of the boys—that the school could ever have “managed” in the narrow quarters once allotted to it.

Cyril, though constantly successful at school, a rising man, an infallible bringer-home of excellent reports, and a regular taker of prizes, became gradually less satisfactory in the house. He was “kept in” occasionally, and although his father pretended to hold that to be kept in was to slur the honour of a spotless family, Cyril continued to be kept in; a hardened sinner, lost to shame. But this was not the worst. The worst undoubtedly was that Cyril was “getting rough.” No definite accusation could be laid against him; the offence was general, vague, everlasting; it was in all he did and said, in every gesture and movement. He shouted, whistled, sang, stamped, stumbled, lunged. He omitted such empty rites as saying “Yes” or “Please,” and wiping his nose. He replied gruffly and nonchalantly to polite questions, or he didn’t reply until the questions were repeated, and even then with a “lost” air that was not genuine. His shoe-laces were a sad sight, and his finger-nails no sight at all for a decent woman; his hair was as rough as his conduct; hardly at the pistol’s

point could he be forced to put oil on it. In brief, he was no longer the nice boy that he used to be.

In these conditions he reached the advanced age of thirteen. And his parents, who despite their notion of themselves as wide-awake parents were a simple pair, never suspected that his heart, conceived to be still pure, had become a crawling, horrible mass of corruption.

One day the head-master called at the shop. Now, to see a head-master walking about the town during school-hours is a startling spectacle, and is apt to give you the same uncanny sensation as when, alone in a room, you think you see something move which ought not to move. Mr. Povey was startled. Mr. Povey had a thumping within his breast as he rubbed his hands and drew the head-master to the private corner where his desk was. "What can I do for you to-day?" he almost said to the head-master. But he did not say it. The boot was emphatically not on that leg. The head-master talked to Mr. Povey, in tones carefully low, for about a quarter of an hour, and then he closed the interview. Mr. Povey escorted him across the shop, and the head-master said with ordinary loudness: "Of course it's nothing. But my experience is that it's just as well to be on the safe side, and I thought I'd tell you. Forewarned is forearmed. I have other parents to see." They shook hands at the door. Then Mr. Povey stepped out onto the pavement and, in front of the whole Square, detained an unwilling head-master for quite another minute.

Nothing occurred for several days. And then one morning—it was Constance's birthday: children are nearly always horribly unlucky in their choice of days for sin—Mr. Povey, having executed mysterious movements in the shop after Cyril's departure to school, jammed his hat on

his head and ran forth in pursuit of Cyril, whom he intercepted with two other boys, at the corner of Oldcastle Street and Acre Passage.

Cyril stood as if turned into salt. "Come back home!" said Mr. Povey, grimly; and for the sake of the other boys: "Please."

"But I shall be late for school, father," Cyril weakly urged.

"Never mind."

They passed through the shop together, causing a terrific concealed emotion, and then they did violence to Constance by appearing in the parlour. Constance was engaged in cutting straws and ribbons to make a straw-frame for a water-colour drawing of a moss-rose which her pure-hearted son had given her as a birthday present.

"Why—what—?" she exclaimed. She said no more at the moment because she was sure, from the faces of her men, that the time was big with fearful events.

"Take your satchel off," Mr. Povey ordered coldly. "And your mortar-board," he added with a peculiar intonation, as if glad thus to prove that Cyril was one of those rude boys who have to be told to take their hats off in a room.

"Whatever's amiss?" Constance murmured under her breath, as Cyril obeyed the command. "Whatever's amiss?"

Mr. Povey made no immediate answer. He was in charge of these proceedings, and was very anxious to conduct them with dignity and with complete effectiveness. Little fat man over fifty, with a wizened face, grey-haired and grey-bearded, he was as nervous as a youth. His heart beat furiously. And Constance, the portly matron who would never see forty again, was just as nervous as



a girl. Cyril had gone very white. All three felt physically sick.

"What money have you got in your pockets?" Mr. Povey demanded, as a commencement.

Cyril, who had had no opportunity to prepare his case, offered no reply.

"You heard what I said," Mr. Povey thundered.

"I've got three-halfpence," Cyril murmured glumly, looking down at the floor. His lower lip seemed to hang precariously away from his gums.

"Where did you get that from?"

"It's part of what mother gave me," said the boy.

"I did give him a threepenny bit last week," Constance put in guiltily. "It was a long time since he had had any money."

"If you gave it him, that's enough," said Mr. Povey, quickly, and to the boy: "That's all you've got?"

"Yes, father," said the boy.

"You're sure?"

"Yes, father."

Cyril was playing a hazardous game for the highest stakes, and under grave disadvantages; and he acted for the best. He guarded his own interests as well as he could.

Mr. Povey found himself obliged to take a serious risk. "Empty your pockets, then."

Cyril, perceiving that he had lost that particular game, emptied his pockets.

"Cyril," said Constance, "how often have I told you to change your handkerchiefs oftener! Just look at this!"

Astonishing creature! She was in the seventh hell of sick apprehension, and yet she said that!

After the handkerchief emerged the common school-

boy stock of articles useful and magic, and then, last, a silver florin!

Mr. Povey felt relief.

"Oh, Cyril!" whimpered Constance.

"Give it your mother," said Mr. Povey.

The boy stepped forward awkwardly, and Constance, weeping, took the coin.

"Please look at it, mother," said Mr. Povey. "And tell me if there's a cross marked on it."

Constance's tears blurred the coin. She had to wipe her eyes.

"Yes," she whispered faintly. "There's something on it."

"I thought so," said Mr. Povey. "Where did you steal it from?" he demanded.

"Out of the till," answered Cyril.

"Have you ever stolen anything out of the till before?"

"Yes."

"Yes, what."

"Yes, father."

"Take your hands out of your pockets and stand up straight, if you can. How often?"

"I—I don't know, father."

"I blame myself," said Mr. Povey, frankly. "I blame myself. The till ought always to be locked. All tills ought always to be locked. But we felt we could trust the assistants. If anybody had told me that I ought not to trust you, if anybody had told me that my own son would be the thief, I should have—well, I don't know what I should have said!"

Mr. Povey was quite justified in blaming himself. The fact was that the functioning of that till was a patriarchal survival, which he ought to have revolutionised, but which

it had never occurred to him to revolutionise, so accustomed to it was he.

The thing was a perfect device for the manufacture of young criminals.

"And how have you been spending this money?" Mr. Povey inquired.

Cyril's hands slipped into his pockets again. Then, noticing the lapse, he dragged them out.

"Sweets," said he.

"Anything else?"

"Sweets and things."

"Oh!" said Mr. Povey. "Well, now you can go down into the cinder-cellar and bring up here all the things there are in that little box in the corner. Off you go!"

And off went Cyril. He had to swagger through the kitchen.

"What did I tell you, Master Cyril?" Amy unwisely asked of him. "You've copped it finely this time."

"Copped" was a word which she had learned from Cyril.

"Go on, you old bitch!" Cyril growled.

As he returned from the cellar, Amy said angrily:

"I told you I should tell your father the next time you called me that, and I shall. You mark my words."

"Cant! cant!" he retorted. "Do you think I don't know who's been canting? Cant! cant!"

Upstairs in the parlour Samuel was explaining the matter to his wife. There had been a perfect epidemic of smoking in the school. The head-master had discovered it and, he hoped, stamped it out. What had disturbed the head-master far more than the smoking was the fact that a few boys had been found to possess somewhat costly pipes, cigar-holders, or cigarette-holders. The head-

master, wily, had not confiscated these articles; he had merely informed the parents concerned. In his opinion the articles came from one single source, a generous thief; he left the parents to ascertain which of them had brought a thief into the world.

Further information Mr. Povey had culled from Amy, and there could remain no doubt that Cyril had been providing his chums with the utensils of smoking, the till supplying the means. He had told Amy that the things which he secreted in the cellar had been presented to him by blood-brothers. But Mr. Povey did not believe that. Anyhow, he had marked every silver coin in the till for three nights, and had watched the till in the mornings from behind the merino-pile; and the florin on the parlour-table spoke of his success as a detective.

Constance felt guilty on behalf of Cyril. As Mr. Povey outlined his case she could not free herself from an entirely irrational sensation of sin; at any rate of special responsibility. Cyril seemed to be her boy and not Samuel's boy at all. She avoided her husband's glance. This was very odd.

Then Cyril returned, and his parents composed their faces, and he deposited, next to the florin, a sham meer-schaum pipe in a case, a tobacco-pouch, a cigar of which one end had been charred but the other not cut, and a half-empty packet of cigarettes without a label.

Nothing could be hid from Mr. Povey. The details were distressing.

"So Cyril is a liar and a thief, to say nothing of this smoking!" Mr. Povey concluded.

He spoke as if Cyril had invented strange and monstrous sins. But deep down in his heart a little voice was telling him, as regards the smoking, that *he* had set the

example. Mr. Baines had never smoked. Mr. Critchlow never smoked. Only men like Daniel smoked.

Thus far Mr. Povey had conducted the proceedings to his own satisfaction. He had proved the crime. He had made Cyril confess. The whole affair lay revealed. Well—what next? Cyril ought to have dissolved in repentance; something dramatic ought to have occurred. But Cyril simply stood with hanging, sulky head, and gave no sign of proper feeling.

Mr. Povey considered that, until something did happen, he must improve the occasion.

"Here we have trade getting worse every day," said he (it was true), "and you are robbing your parents to make a beast of yourself, and corrupting your companions! I wonder your mother never smelt you!"

"I never dreamt of such a thing!" said Constance, grievously.

Besides, a young man clever enough to rob a till is usually clever enough to find out that the secret of safety in smoking is to use cachous and not to keep the stuff in your pockets a minute longer than you can help.

"There's no knowing how much money you have stolen," said Mr. Povey. "A thief!"

If Cyril had stolen cakes, jam, string, cigars, Mr. Povey would never have said "thief" as he did say it. But money! Money was different. And a till was not a cupboard or a larder. A till was a till. Cyril had struck at the very basis of society.

"And on your mother's birthday!" Mr. Povey said further.

"There's one thing I can do!" he said. "I can burn all this. Built on lies! How dared you?"

And he pitched into the fire—not the apparatus of

crime, but the water-colour drawing of a moss-rose and the straws and the blue ribbon for bows at the corners.

"How dared you?" he repeated.

"You never gave me any money," Cyril muttered.

He thought the marking of coins a mean trick, and the dragging-in of bad trade and his mother's birthday roused a familiar devil that usually slept quietly in his breast.

"What's that you say?" Mr. Povey almost shouted.

"You never gave me any money," the devil repeated in a louder tone than Cyril had employed.

(It was true. But Cyril "had only to ask," and he would have received all that was good for him.)

Mr. Povey sprang up. Mr. Povey also had a devil. The two devils gazed at each other for an instant; and then, noticing that Cyril's head was above Mr. Povey's, the elder devil controlled itself. Mr. Povey had suddenly had as much drama as he wanted.

"Get away to bed!" said he with dignity.

Cyril went, defiantly.

"He's to have nothing but bread and water, mother," Mr. Povey finished. He was, on the whole, pleased with himself.

## CHAPTER V.

### ANOTHER CRIME.

#### I.

ONE night—it was late in the afternoon of the same year, about six months after the tragedy of the florin—Samuel Povey was wakened up by a hand on his shoulder and a voice that whispered: "Father!"

The thief and the liar was standing in his night-shirt

by the bed. Samuel's sleepy eyes could just descry him in the thick gloom.

"What—what?" questioned the father, gradually coming to consciousness. "What are you doing there?"

"I didn't want to wake mother up," the boy whispered. "There's someone been throwing dirt or something at our windows, and has been for a long time."

"Eh, what?"

Samuel stared at the dim form of the thief and liar. The boy was tall, not in the least like a little boy; and yet, then, he seemed to his father as quite a little boy, a little "thing" in a night-shirt, with childish gestures and childish inflections, and a childish, delicious, quaint anxiety not to disturb his mother, who had lately been deprived of sleep owing to an illness of Amy's which had demanded nursing. His father had not so perceived him for years. In that instant the conviction that Cyril was permanently unfit for human society finally expired in the father's mind. Time had already weakened it very considerably. The decision that, be Cyril what he might, the summer holiday must be taken as usual, had dealt it a fearful blow. And yet, though Samuel and Constance had grown so accustomed to the companionship of a criminal that they frequently lost memory of his guilt for long periods, nevertheless the convention of his leprosy had more or less persisted with Samuel until that moment: when it vanished with strange suddenness, to Samuel's conscious relief.

There was a rain of pellets on the window.

"Hear that?" demanded Cyril, whispering dramatically. "And it's been like that on my window too."

Samuel arose. "Go back to your room!" he ordered in the same dramatic whisper; but not as father to son—rather as conspirator to conspirator.

Constance slept. They could hear her regular breathing.

Barefooted, the elderly gowned figure followed the younger, and one after the other they creaked down the two steps which separated Cyril's room from his parents'.

"Shut the door quietly!" said Samuel.

Cyril obeyed.

And then, having lighted Cyril's gas, Samuel drew the blind, unfastened the catch of the window, and began to open it with many precautions of silence. All the sashes in that house were difficult to manage. Cyril stood close to his father, shivering without knowing that he shivered, astonished only that his father had not told him to get back into bed at once. It was, beyond doubt, the proudest hour of Cyril's career. In addition to the mysterious circumstances of the night, there was in the situation that thrill which always communicates itself to a father and son when they are afoot together upon an enterprise unsuspected by the woman from whom their lives have no secrets.

Samuel put his head out of the window.

A man was standing there.

"That you, Samuel?" The voice came low.

"Yes," replied Samuel, cautiously. "It's not Cousin Daniel, is it?"

"I want ye," said Daniel Povey, curtly.

Samuel paused. "I'll be down in a minute," he said.

Cyril at length received the command to get back into bed at once.

"Whatever's up, father?" he asked joyously.

"I don't know. I must put some things on and go and see."

He shut down the window on all the breezes that were pouring into the room.



"Now quick, before I turn the gas out!" he admonished, his hand on the gas-tap.

"You'll tell me in the morning, won't you, father?"

"Yes," said Mr. Povey, conquering his habitual impulse to say "No."

He crept back to the large bedroom to grope for clothes.

When, having descended to the parlour and lighted the gas there, he opened the side-door, expecting to let Cousin Daniel in, there was no sign of Cousin Daniel. Presently he saw a figure standing at the corner of the Square. He whistled—Samuel had a singular faculty of whistling, the envy of his son—and Daniel beckoned to him. He nearly extinguished the gas and then ran out, hatless. He was wearing most of his clothes, except his linen collar and necktie, and the collar of his coat was turned up.

Daniel advanced before him, without waiting, into the confectioner's shop opposite. Being part of the most modern building in the Square, Daniel's shop was provided with the new roll-down iron shutter, by means of which you closed your establishment with a motion similar to the winding of a large clock, instead of putting up twenty separate shutters one by one as in the sixteenth century. The little portal in the vast sheet of armour was ajar, and Daniel had passed into the gloom beyond. At the same moment a policeman came along on his beat, cutting off Mr. Povey from Daniel.

"Good night, officer! Brrr!" said Mr. Povey, gathering his dignity about him and holding himself as though it was part of his normal habit to take exercise bare-headed and collarless in St. Luke's Square on cold November nights. He behaved so because, if Daniel had

desired the services of a policeman, Daniel would of course have spoken to this one.

"Goo' night, sir," said the policeman, after recognising him.

"What time is it?" asked Samuel, bold.

"A quarter-past one, sir."

The policeman, leaving Samuel at the little open door, went forward across the lamplit Square, and Samuel entered his cousin's shop.

Daniel Povey was standing behind the door, and as Samuel came in he shut the door with a startling sudden movement. Save for the twinkle of gas, the shop was in darkness. It had the empty appearance which a well-managed confectioner's and baker's always has at night. The large brass scales near the flour-bins glinted; and the glass cake-stands, with scarce a tart among them, also caught the faint flare of the gas.

"What's the matter, Daniel? Anything wrong?" Samuel asked, feeling boyish as he usually did in the presence of Daniel.

The well-favoured white-haired man seized him with one hand by the shoulder in a grip that convicted Samuel of frailty.

"Look her, Sam'l," said he in his low, pleasant voice, somewhat altered by excitement. "You know as my wife drinks?"

He stared defiantly at Samuel.

"N—no," said Samuel. "That is—no one's ever *said—*"

This was true. He did not know that Mrs. Daniel Povey, at the age of fifty, had definitely taken to drink. There had been rumours that she enjoyed a glass with too much gusto; but "drinks" meant more than that.

"She drinks," Daniel Povey continued. "And has done this last two year!"

"I'm very sorry to hear it," said Samuel, tremendously shocked by this brutal rending of the cloak of decency.

Always, everybody had feigned to Daniel, and Daniel had feigned to everybody, that his wife was as other wives. And now the man himself had torn to pieces in a moment the veil of thirty years' weaving.

"And if that was the worst!" Daniel murmured reflectively, loosening his grip.

Samuel was excessively disturbed. His cousin was hinting at matters which he himself, at any rate, had never hinted at even to Constance, so abhorrent were they; matters unutterable, which hung like clouds in the social atmosphere of the town, and of which at rare intervals one conveyed one's cognisance, not by words, but by something scarce perceptible in a glance, an accent. Not often is a town such as Bursley starred with such a woman as Mrs. Daniel Povey.

"But what's wrong?" Samuel asked, trying to be firm.

And, "What *is* wrong?" he asked himself. "What does all this mean, at after one o'clock in the morning?"

"Look here, Sam'l," Daniel recommenced, seizing his shoulder again. "I went to Liverpool corn market to-day, and missed the last train, so I came by the mail from Crewe. And what do I find? I find Dick sitting on the stairs in the dark pretty nigh naked."

"Sitting on the stairs? Dick?"

"Aye! This is what I come home to?"

"But—"

"Hold on! He's been in bed a couple of days with a feverish cold, caught through lying in damp sheets as his mother had forgot to air. She brings him no supper

to-night. He calls out. No answer. Then he gets up to go downstairs and see what's happened, and he slips on th' stairs and breaks his knee, or puts it out or summat. Sat there hours, seemingly! Couldn't walk neither up nor down."

"And was your—wife—was Mrs.—?"

"Dead drunk in the parlour, Sam'l."

"But the servant?"

"Servant?" Daniel Povey laughed. "We can't keep our servants. They won't stay. *You* know that."

He did. Mrs. Daniel Povey's domestic methods and idiosyncrasies could at any rate be freely discussed, and they were.

"And what have you done?"

"Done? Why, I picked him up in my arms and carried him upstairs again. And a fine job I had too! Here! Come here!"

Daniel strode impulsively across the shop—the counter-flap "was up—and opened a door at the back. Samuel followed. Never before had he penetrated so far into his cousin's secrets. On the left, within the doorway, were the stairs, dark; on the right a shut door; and in front an open door giving onto a yard. At the extremity of the yard he discerned a building, vaguely lit, and naked figures strangely moving in it.

"What's that? Who's there?" he asked sharply.

"That's the bakehouse," Daniel replied, as if surprised at such a question. "It's one of their long nights."

Never, during the brief remainder of his life, did Samuel eat a mouthful of common bread without recalling that midnight apparition. He had lived for half a century, and thoughtlessly eaten bread as though loaves grew ready-made on trees.

"Listen!" Daniel commanded him.

He cocked his ear, and caught a feeble, complaining wail from an upper floor.

"That's Dick! That is!" said Daniel Povey.

It sounded more like the distress of a child than of an adventurous young man of twenty-four or so.

"But is he in pain? Haven't you fetched the doctor?"

"Not yet," answered Daniel, with a vacant stare.

Samuel gazed at him closely for a second. And Daniel seemed to him very old and helpless and pathetic, a man unequal to the situation in which he found himself; and yet, despite the dignified snow of his age, wistfully boyish. Samuel thought swiftly: "This has been too much for him. He's almost out of his mind. That's the explanation. Someone's got to take charge, and I must." And all the courageous resolution of his character braced itself to the crisis. Being without a collar, being in slippers, and his suspenders imperfectly fastened anyhow,—these things seemed to be a part of the crisis.

"I'll just run upstairs and have a look at him," said Samuel, in a matter-of-fact tone.

Daniel did not reply.

There was a glimmer at the top of the stairs. Samuel mounted, found the gas-jet, and turned it on full. A dingy, dirty, untidy passage was revealed, the very antechamber of discomfort. Guided by the moans, Samuel entered a bedroom, which was in a shameful condition of neglect, and lighted only by a nearly expired candle. Was it possible that a house-mistress could so lose her self-respect? Samuel thought of his own abode, meticulously and impeccably "kept," and a hard bitterness against Mrs. Daniel surged up in his soul.

"Is that you, doctor?" said a voice from the bed; the moans ceased.

Samuel raised the candle.

Dick lay there, his face, on which was a beard of several days' growth, distorted by anguish, sweating; his tousled brown hair was limp with sweat.

"Where the hell's the doctor?" the young man demanded brusquely. Evidently he had no curiosity about Samuel's presence; the one thing that struck him was that Samuel was not the doctor.

"He's coming, he's coming," said Samuel, soothingly.

"Well, if he isn't here soon I shall be damn well dead," said Dick, in feeble resentful anger. "I can tell you that."

Samuel deposited the candle and ran downstairs. "I say, Daniel," he said, roused and hot, "this is really ridiculous. Why on earth didn't you fetch the doctor while you were waiting for me? Where's the missis?"

Daniel Povey was slowly emptying grains of Indian corn out of his jacket-pocket into one of the big receptacles behind the counter on the baker's side of the shop. He had provisioned himself with Indian corn as ammunition for Samuel's bedroom window; he was now returning the surplus.

"Are ye going for Harrop?" he questioned hesitatingly.

"Why, of course!" Samuel exclaimed. "Where's the missis?"

"Happen you'd better go and have a look at her," said Daniel Povey. "She's in th' parlour."

He preceded Samuel to the shut door on the right. When he opened it the parlour appeared in full illumination.

"Here! Go in!" said Daniel.

Samuel went in, afraid. In a room as dishevelled and filthy as the bedroom, Mrs. Daniel Povey lay stretched awkwardly on a worn horse-hair sofa, her head thrown back, her face discoloured, her eyes bulging, her mouth wet and yawning: a sight horribly offensive. Samuel was frightened; he was struck with fear and with disgust. The singing gas beat down ruthlessly on that dreadful figure. A wife and mother! The lady of a house! The centre of order! The fount of healing! The balm for worry, and the refuge of distress! She was vile. Her scanty yellow-grey hair was dirty, her hollowed neck all grime, her hands abominable, her black dress in decay. She was the dishonour of her sex, her situation, and her years. She was a fouler obscenity than the inexperienced Samuel had ever conceived. And by the door stood her husband, neat, spotless, almost stately, the man who for thirty years had marshalled all his immense pride to suffer this woman, the jolly man who had laughed through thick and thin! Samuel remembered when they were married. And he remembered when, years after their marriage, she was still as pretty, artificial, coquettish, and adamant in her caprices as a young harlot with a fool at her feet. Time and the slow wrath of God had changed her.

He remained master of himself and approached her; then stopped.

"But—" he stammered.

"Aye, Sam'l, lad!" said the old man from the door. "I doubt I've killed her! I doubt I've killed her! I took and shook her. I got her by the neck. And before I knew where I was, I'd done it. She never drink brandy again. This is what it's come to!"

He moved away.

All Samuel's flesh tingled as a heavy wave of emotion rolled through his being. It was just as if someone had dealt him a blow unimaginably tremendous. His heart shivered, as a ship shivers at the mountainous crash of the waters. He was numbed. He wanted to weep, to vomit, to die, to sink away. But a voice was whispering to him: "You will have to go through with this. You are in charge of this." He thought of *his* wife and child, innocently asleep in the cleanly pureness of *his* home. And he felt the roughness of his coat-collar round his neck and the insecurity of his trousers. He passed out of the room, shutting the door. And across the yard he had a momentary glimpse of those nude nocturnal forms, unconsciously attitudinising in the bake-house. And down the stairs came the protests of Dick, driven by pain into a monotonous silly blasphemy.

"I'll fetch Harrop," he said, melancholy, to his cousin.

The doctor's house was less than fifty yards off, and the doctor had a night-bell, which, though he was a much older man than his father had been at his age, he still answered promptly. No need to bombard the doctor's premises with Indian corn! While Samuel was parleying with the doctor through a window, the question ran incessantly through his mind: "What about telling the police?"

But when, in advance of old Harrop, he returned to Daniel's shop, lo! the policeman previously encountered had returned upon his beat, and Daniel was talking to him in the little doorway. No other soul was about. Down King Street, along Wedgwood Street, up the Square, towards Brougham Street, nothing but gas-lamps burning with their everlasting patience, and the blind *façades* of shops. Only in the second storey of the Bank Building



at the top of the Square a light showed mysteriously through a blind. Somebody ill there!

The policeman was in a high state of nervous excitement. That had happened to him which had never happened to him before. Of the sixty policemen in Bursley, just he had been chosen by fate to fit the socket of destiny. He was startled.

"What's this, what's this, Mr. Povey?" he turned hastily to Samuel. "What's this as Mr. Councillor Povey is a-telling me?"

"You come in, sergeant," said Daniel.

"If I come in," said the policeman to Samuel, "you mun' go along Wedgwood Street, Mr. Povey, and bring my mate. He should be on Duck Bank, by rights."

It was astonishing, when once the stone had begun to roll, how quickly it ran. In half an hour Samuel had actually parted from Daniel at the police-office behind the Shambles, and was hurrying to rouse his wife so that she could look after Dick Povey until he might be taken off to Pirehill Infirmary, as old Harrop had instantly, on seeing him, decreed.

"Ah!" he reflected in the turmoil of his soul: "God is not mocked!" That was his basic idea: God is not mocked! Daniel was a good fellow, honourable, brilliant; a figure in the world. But what of his licentious tongue? What of his frequenting of bars? (How had he come to miss that train from Liverpool? How?) For many years he, Samuel, had seen in Daniel a living refutation of the authenticity of the old Hebrew menaces. But he had been wrong, after all! God is not mocked! And Samuel was aware of a revulsion in himself towards that strict codified godliness from which, in thought, he had perhaps been slipping away,

And with it all he felt, too, a certain officious self-importance, as he woke his wife and essayed to break the news to her in a manner tactfully calm. He had assisted at the most overwhelming event ever known in the history of the town.

## II.

"Your muffler—I'll get it," said Constance. "Cyril, run upstairs and get father's muffler. You know the drawer."

Cyril ran. It behoved everybody, that morning, to be prompt and efficient.

"I don't need any muffler, thank you," said Samuel, coughing and smothering the cough.

"Oh! But, Sam—" Constance protested.

"Now please don't worry me!" said Samuel with frigid finality. "I've got quite enough—!" He did not finish.

Constance sighed as her husband stepped, nervous and self-important, out of the side-door into the street. It was early, not yet eight o'clock, and the shop still unopened.

"Your father couldn't wait," Constance said to Cyril when he had thundered down the stairs in his heavy schoolboy boots. "Give it to me." She went to restore the muffler to its place.

In St. Luke's Square was a crowd of quite two hundred persons, standing moveless in the November mud. The body of Mrs. Daniel Povey had already been taken to the Tiger Hotel, and young Dick Povey was on his way in a covered waggonette to Piregill Infirmary on the other side of Knype. The shop of the crime was closed, and the blinds drawn at the upper windows of the house.

There was absolutely nothing to be seen, not even a policeman. Nevertheless the crowd stared with an extraordinary obstinate attentiveness at the fatal building in Boulton Terrace. Hypnotised by this face of bricks and mortar, it had apparently forgotten all earthly ties, and, regardless of breakfast and a livelihood, was determined to stare at it till the house fell down or otherwise rendered up its secret. Most of its component individuals wore neither overcoats nor collar, but were kept warm by a scarf round the neck and by dint of forcing their fingers into the furthest inch of their pockets. Then they would slowly lift one leg after the other. Starers of infirm purpose would occasionally detach themselves from the throng and sidle away, ashamed of their fickleness. But reinforcements were continually arriving. And to these new-comers all that had been said in gossip had to be repeated and repeated: the same questions, the same answers, the same exclamations, the same proverbial philosophy, the same prophecies recurred in all parts of the Square with an uncanny iterance. Well-dressed men spoke to mere professional loiterers; for this unparalleled and glorious sensation, whose uniqueness grew every instant more impressive, brought out the essential brotherhood of mankind. All had a peculiar feeling that the day was neither Sunday nor week-day, but some eighth day of the week. Yet in the St. Luke's Covered Market close by, the stall-keepers were preparing their stalls just as though it was Saturday, just as though a Town Councillor had not murdered his wife—at last! It was stated, and restated infinitely, that the Povey baking had been taken over by Brindley, the second-best baker and confectioner, who had a stall in the market. And it was asserted, as a philosophical truth, and reas-

serted infinitely, that there would have been no sense in wasting good food.

Samuel's emergence stirred the multitude. But Samuel passed up the Square with a rapt expression; he might have been under an illusion, caused by the extreme gravity of his preoccupations, that he was crossing a deserted Square. He hurried past the Bank and down the Turnhill Road, to the private residence of "Young Lawton," son of the deceased "Lawyer Lawton." Young Lawton followed his father's profession; he was, as his father had been, the most successful solicitor in the town (though reputed by his learned rivals to be a fool), but the custom of calling men by their occupations had died out with horse-cars. Samuel caught young Lawton at his breakfast, and presently drove with him, in the Lawton buggy, to the police-station, where their arrival electrified a crowd as large as that in St. Luke's Square. Later, they drove together to Hanbridge, informally to brief a barrister; and Samuel, not permitted to be present at the first part of the interview between the solicitor and the barrister, was humbled before the pomposity of legal etiquette.

It seemed to Samuel a game. The whole rigmarole of police and police-cells and formalities seemed insincere. His cousin's case was not like any other case, and, though formalities might be necessary, it was rather absurd to pretend that it was like any other case. In what manner it differed from other cases Samuel did not analytically inquire. He thought young Lawton was self-important, and Daniel too humble, in the colloquy of these two, and he endeavoured to indicate, by the dignity of his own demeanour, that in his opinion the proper relative tones had not been set. He could not understand

Daniel's attitude, for he lacked imagination to realise what Daniel had been through. After all, Daniel was not a murderer; his wife's death was due to accident, was simply a mishap.

But in the crowded and stinking court-room of the Town Hall, Samuel began to feel qualms. It occurred that the Stipendiary Magistrate was sitting that morning at Bursley. He sat alone, as not one of the Borough Justices cared to occupy the Bench while a Town Councillor was in the dock. The Stipendiary, recently appointed, was a young man, from the southern part of the county; and a Town Councillor of Bursley was no more to him than a petty tradesman to a man of fashion. He was youthfully enthusiastic for the majesty and the impartiality of English justice, and behaved as though the entire responsibility for the safety of that vast fabric rested on his shoulders. He and the barrister from Hanbridge had had a historic quarrel at Cambridge, and their behaviour to each other was a lesson to the vulgar in the art of chill and consummate politeness. Young Lawton, having been to Oxford, secretly scorned the pair of them, but, as he had engaged counsel, he of course was precluded from adding to the eloquence, which chagrined him. These three were the aristocracy of the court-room; they knew it; Samuel Povey knew it; everybody knew it, and felt it. The barrister brought an unexceptionable zeal to the performance of his duties; he referred in suitable terms to Daniel's character and high position in the town, but nothing could hide the fact that for him too his client was a petty tradesman accused of simple murder. Naturally the Stipendiary was bound to show that before the law all men are equal—the Town Councillor and the common tippler; he succeeded. The policeman gave his evidence,

and the Inspector swore to what Daniel Povey had said when charged. The hearing proceeded so smoothly and quickly that it seemed naught but an empty rite, with Daniel as a lay figure in it. The Stipendiary achieved marvellously the illusion that to him a murder by a Town Councillor in St. Luke's Square was quite an everyday matter. Bail was inconceivable, and the barrister, being unable to suggest any reason why the Stipendiary should grant a remand—indeed, there was no reason—Daniel Povey was committed to the Stafford Assizes for trial. The Stipendiary instantly turned to the consideration of an alleged offence against the Factory Acts by a large local firm of potters. The young magistrate had mistaken his vocation. With his steely calm, with his imperturbable detachment from weak humanity, he ought to have been a General of the Order of Jesuits.

Daniel was removed—he did not go: he was removed, by two bare-headed constables. Samuel wanted to have speech with him, and could not. And later, Samuel stood in the porch of the Town Hall, and Daniel appeared out of a corridor, still in the keeping of two policemen, helmeted now. And down below at the bottom of the broad flight of steps, up which passed dancers on the nights of subscription balls, was a dense crowd, held at bay by other policemen; and beyond the crowd a black van. And Daniel—to his cousin a sort of Christ between thieves—was hurried past the privileged loafers in the corridor, and down the broad steps. A murmuring wave agitated the crowd. Unkempt idlers and ne'er-do-wells in corduroy leaped up like tigers in the air, and the policemen fought them back furiously. And Daniel and his guardians shot through the little living lane. Quick! Quick! For the captive is more sacred even than a

messiah. The law has him in charge! And like a feat of prestidigitation Daniel disappeared into the blackness of the van. A door slammed loudly, triumphantly, and a whip cracked. The crowd had been balked. It was as though the crowd had yelled for Daniel's blood and bones, and the faithful constables had saved him from their lust.

Yes, Samuel had qualms. He had a sickness in the stomach.

After another chat with young Lawton, Samuel, on behalf of Daniel, dropped his pose of the righteous man to whom a mere mishap has occurred, and who is determined, with the lofty pride of innocence, to indulge all the whims of the law, to be more royalist than the king. He perceived that the law must be fought with its own weapons, that no advantage must be surrendered, and every possible advantage seized. He was truly astonished at himself that such a pose had ever been adopted. His eyes were opened; he saw things as they were.

That evening Constance learned all that was in his mind of bitterness against the memory of the dead woman whose failings had brought Daniel Povey to Stafford gaol and Dick to the Pirehill Infirmary. Again and again, in the ensuing days, he referred to the state of foul discomfort which he had discovered in Daniel's house. He nursed a feud against all her relatives, and when, after the inquest, at which he gave evidence full of resentment, she was buried, he vented an angry sigh of relief, and said: "Well, *she's* out of the way!" Thenceforward he had a mission, religious in its solemn intensity, to defend and save Daniel. He took the enterprise upon himself, spending the whole of himself upon it, to the neglect of his

business and the scorn of his health. He lived solely for Daniel's trial, pouring out money in preparation for it. He thought and spoke of nothing else. The affair was his one preoccupation. And as the weeks passed, he became more and more sure of success, more and more sure that he would return with Daniel to Bursley in triumph after the assize. He was convinced of the impossibility that "anything should happen" to Daniel; the circumstances were too clear, too overwhelmingly in Daniel's favour.

When Brindley, the second-best baker and confectioner, made an offer for Daniel's business as a going concern, he was indignant at first. Then Constance, and the lawyer, and Daniel (whom he saw on every permitted occasion) between them persuaded him that if some arrangement was not made, and made quickly, the business would lose all its value, and he consented, on Daniel's behalf, to a temporary agreement under which Brindley should reopen the shop and manage it on certain terms until Daniel regained his freedom towards the end of January. He would not listen to Daniel's plaintive insistence that he would never care to be seen in Bursley again. He pooh-poohed it. He protested furiously that the whole town was seething with sympathy for Daniel; and this was true. He became Daniel's defending angel, rescuing Daniel from Daniel's own weakness and apathy. He became, indeed, Daniel.

One morning the shop-shutter was wound up, and Brindley, inflated with the importance of controlling two establishments, strutted in and out under the sign of Daniel Povey. And traffic in bread and cakes and flour was resumed. Apparently the sea of time had risen and covered Daniel and all that was his; for his wife was



under earth; and Dick lingered at Pirehill, unable to stand, and Daniel was locked away. Apparently, in the regular flow of the life of the Square, Daniel was forgotten. But not in Samuel Povey's heart was he forgotten! There, before an altar erected to the martyr, the sacred flame of a new faith burned with fierce consistency. Samuel, in his greying middle-age, had inherited the eternal youth of the apostle.

### III.

On the dark winter morning when Samuel set off to the grand assize, Constance did not ask his views as to what protection he would adopt against the weather. She silently ranged special underclothing, and by the warmth of the fire, which for days she had kept ablaze in the bedroom, Samuel silently donned the special underclothing. Over that, with particular fastidious care, he put his best suit. Not a word was spoken. Constance and he were not estranged, but the relations between them were in a state of feverish excitation. Samuel had had a cold on his flat chest for weeks, and nothing that Constance could invent would move it. A few days in bed or even in one room at a uniform temperature would have surely worked the cure. Samuel, however, would not stay in one room; he would not stay in the house, nor yet in Bursley. He would take his lacerating cough on chilly trains to Stafford. He had no ears for reason; he simply could not listen; he was in a dream. After Christmas a crisis came. Constance grew desperate. It was a battle between her will and his that occurred one night when Constance, marshalling all her forces, suddenly insisted that he must go out no more until he was cured. In the fight Constance was scarcely recognisable. She deliberately gave way to

hysteria; she was no longer soft and gentle; she flung bitterness at him like vitriol; she shrieked like a common shrew. It seems almost incredible that Constance should have gone so far; but she did. She accused him, amid sobs, of putting his cousin before his wife and son, of not caring whether or not she was left a widow as the result of this obstinacy. And she ended by crying passionately that she might as well talk to a post. She might just as well have talked to a post. Samuel answered quietly and coldly. He told her that it was useless for her to put herself about, as he should act as he thought fit. It was a most extraordinary scene, and quite unique in their annals. Constance was beaten. She accepted the defeat, gradually controlling her sobs and changing her tone to the tone of the vanquished. She kissed him in bed, kissing the rod. And he gravely kissed her.

Henceforward she knew, in practice, what the inevitable, when you have to live with it, may contain of anguish wretched and humiliating. Her husband was risking his life, so she was absolutely convinced, and she could do nothing; she had come to the bed-rock of Samuel's character. She felt that, for the time being, she had a madman in the house, who could not be treated according to ordinary principles. The continual strain aged her. Her one source of relief was to talk with Cyril. She talked to him without reserve, and the words "your father," "your father," were everlastingly on her complaining tongue. Yes, she was utterly changed. Often she would weep when alone.

Nevertheless she frequently forgot that she had been beaten. She had no notion of honourable warfare. She was always beginning again, always firing under a flag of truce; and thus she constituted a very inconvenient op-

ponent. Samuel was obliged, while hardening on the main point, to compromise on lesser questions. She too could be formidable, and when her lips took a certain pose, and her eyes glowed, he would have put on forty mufflers had she commanded. Thus it was she who arranged all the details of the supreme journey to Stafford. Samuel was to drive to Knype, so as to avoid the rigours of the Loop Line train from Bursley and the waiting on cold platforms. At Knype he was to take the express, and to travel first-class.

After he was dressed on that gas-lit morning, he learnt bit by bit the extent of her elaborate preparations. The breakfast was a special breakfast, and he had to eat it all. Then the cab came, and he saw Amy put hot bricks into it. Constance herself put galoshes over his boots, not because it was damp, but because indiarubber keeps the feet warm. Constance herself bandaged his neck, and unbuttoned his waistcoat and stuck an extra flannel under his dickey. Constance herself warmed his woollen gloves, and enveloped him in his largest overcoat.

Samuel then saw Cyril getting ready to go out. "Where are you off?" he demanded.

"He's going with you as far as Knype," said Constance, grimly. "He'll see you into the train and then come back here in the cab."

She had sprung this indignity upon him. She glared. Cyril glanced with timid bravado from one to the other. Samuel had to yield.

Thus in the winter darkness—for it was not yet dawn—Samuel set forth to the trial, escorted by his son. The reverberation of his appalling cough from the cab was the last thing that Constance heard.

During most of the day Constance sat in "Miss In-

sull's corner" in the shop. Twenty years ago this very corner had been hers. But now, instead of large millinery-boxes enwrapped in brown paper, it was shut off from the rest of the counter by a rich screen of mahogany and ground-glass, and within the enclosed space all the apparatus necessary to the activity of Miss Insull had been provided for.

It was a long day. Towards tea-time, just before Cyril was due from school, Mr. Critchlow came surprisingly in. That is to say, his arrival was less of a surprise to Miss Insull and the rest of the staff than to Constance. For he had lately formed an irregular habit of popping in at tea-time, to chat with Miss Insull. Mr. Critchlow was still defying time. He kept his long, thin figure perfectly erect. His features had not altered. His hair and beard could not have been whiter than they had been for years past. He wore his long white apron, and over that a thick reefer jacket. In his long, knotty fingers he carried a copy of the *Signal*.

Evidently he had not expected to find the corner occupied by Constance. She was sewing.

"So it's you!" he said, in his unpleasant, grating voice, not even glancing at Miss Insull. He had gained the reputation of being the rudest old man in Bursley. But his general demeanour expressed indifference rather than rudeness. It was a manner that said: "You've got to take me as I am. I may be an egotist, hard, mean, and convinced; but those who don't like it can lump it. I'm indifferent."

He put one elbow on the top of the screen, showing the *Signal*.

"Mr. Critchlow!" said Constance, primly; she had acquired Samuel's dislike of him.

"It's begun!" he observed with mysterious glee.

"Has it?" Constance said eagerly. "Is it in the paper already?"

She had been far more disturbed about her husband's health than about the trial of Daniel Povey for murder, but her interest in the trial was of course tremendous. And this news, that it had actually begun, thrilled her.

"Aye!" said Mr. Critchlow. "Didn't ye hear the *Signal* boy hollering just now all over the Square?"

"No," said Constance. For her, newspapers did not exist. She never had the idea of opening one, never felt any curiosity which she could not satisfy, if she could satisfy it at all, without the powerful aid of the press. And even on this day it had not occurred to her that the *Signal* might be worth opening.

"Aye!" repeated Mr. Critchlow. "Seemingly it began at two o'clock—or thereabouts." He gave a moment of his attention to a noisy gas-jet, which he carefully lowered.

"What does it say?"

"Nothing yet!" said Mr. Critchlow; and they read the few brief sentences, under their big heading, which described the formal commencement of the trial of Daniel Povey for the murder of his wife. "There was some as said," he remarked, pushing up his spectacles, "that grand jury would alter the charge, or summat!" He laughed, grimly tolerant of the extreme absurdity. "Ah!" he added contemplatively, turning his head to see if the assistants were listening. They were. It would have been too much, on such a day, to expect a strict adherence to the etiquette of the shop.

Constance had been hearing a good deal lately of grand juries, but she had understood nothing, nor had she sought to understand.

"I'm very glad it's come on so soon," she said. "In a sense, that is! I was afraid Sam might be kept at Stafford for days. Do you think it will last long?"

"Not it!" said Mr. Critchlow, positively. "There's naught in it to spin out."

Then a silence, punctuated by the sound of stitching.

Constance would really have preferred not to converse with the old man; but the desire for reassurance, for the calming of her own fears, forced her to speak, though she knew well that Mr. Critchlow was precisely the last man in the town to give moral assistance if he thought it was wanted.

"I do hope everything will be all right!" she murmured.

"Everything'll be all right!" he said gaily. "Everything'll be all right. Only it'll be all wrong for Dan."

"Whatever do you mean, Mr. Critchlow?" she protested. Nothing, she reflected, could rouse pity in that heart, not even a tragedy like Daniel's. She bit her lip for having spoken.

"Well," he said in loud tones, frankly addressing the girls round the stove as much as Constance. "I've met with some rare good arguments this new year, no mistake! There's been some as say that Dan never meant to do it. That's as may be. But if it's a good reason for not hanging, there's an end to capital punishment in this country. 'Never meant!' There's a lot of 'em as 'never meant!' Then I'm told as she was a gallivanting woman and no housekeeper, and as often drunk as sober. I'd no call to be told that. If strangling is a right punishment for a wife as spends her time in drinking brandy instead of sweeping floors and airing sheets, then Dan's safe. But I don't seem to see Judge Lindley telling the

jury as it is. I've been a juryman under Judge Lindley myself—and more than once—and I don't seem to see him, like!" He paused with his mouth open. "As for all them nobbs," he continued, "including th' rector, as have gone to Stafford to kiss the book and swear that Dan's reputation is second to none—if they could ha' sworn as Dan wasn't in th' house at all that night, if they could ha' sworn he was in Jericho, there'd ha' been some sense in their going. But as it is, they'd ha' done better to stop at home and mind their business. Bless us! Sam wanted *me* to go!"

He laughed again, in the faces of the horrified and angry women.

"I'm surprised at you, Mr. Critchlow! I really am!" Constance exclaimed.

And the assistants inarticulately supported her with vague sounds. Miss Insull got up and poked the stove. Every soul in the establishment was loyally convinced that Daniel Povey would be acquitted, and to breathe a doubt on the brightness of this certainty was a hideous crime. The conviction was not within the domain of reason; it was an act of faith; and arguments merely fretted, without in the slightest degree disturbing it.

"Ye may be!" Mr. Critchlow gaily concurred. He was very content.

Just as he shuffled round to leave the shop, Cyril entered.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Critchlow," said Cyril, sheepishly polite.

Mr. Critchlow gazed hard at the boy, then nodded his head several times rapidly, as though to say: "Here's another fool in the making! So the generations follow

one another!" He made no answer to the salutation, and departed.

Cyril ran round to his mother's corner, pitching his bag onto the show-room stairs as he passed them. Taking off his hat, he kissed her, and she unbuttoned his overcoat with her cold hands.

"What's old Methuselah after?" he demanded.

"Hush!" Constance softly corrected him. "He came in to tell me the trial had started."

"Oh, I knew that! A boy bought a paper and I saw it. I say, mother, will father be in the paper?" And then in a different tone: "I say, mother, what is there for tea?"

When his stomach had learnt exactly what there was for tea, the boy began to show an immense and talkative curiosity in the trial. He would not set himself to his home-lessons. "It's no use, mother," he said, "I can't." They returned to the shop together, and Cyril would go every moment to the door to listen for the cry of a news-boy. Presently he hit upon the idea that perhaps news-boys might be crying the special edition of the *Signal* in the market-place, in front of the Town Hall, to the neglect of St. Luke's Square. And nothing would satisfy him but he must go forth and see. He went, without his overcoat, promising to run. The shop waited with a strange anxiety. Cyril had created, by his restless movements to and fro, an atmosphere of strained expectancy. It seemed now as if the whole town stood with beating heart, fearful of tidings and yet burning to get them. Constance pictured Stafford, which she had never seen, and a court of justice, which she had never seen, and her husband and Daniel in it. And she waited.



Cyril ran in. "No!" he announced breathlessly. "Nothing yet."

"Don't take cold, now you're hot," Constance advised.

But he would keep near the door. Soon he ran off again.

And perhaps fifteen seconds after he had gone, the strident cry of a *Signal* boy was heard in the distance, faint and indistinct at first, then clearer and louder.

"There's a paper!" said the apprentice.

"Sh!" said Constance, listening.

"Sh!" echoed Miss Insull.

"Yes, it is!" said Constance. "Miss Insull, just step out and get a paper. Here's a halfpenny."

The halfpenny passed quickly from one thimble hand to another. Miss Insull scurried.

She came in triumphantly with the sheet, which Constance tremblingly took. Constance could not find the report at first. Miss Insull pointed to it, and read—

"Summing up! Lower down, lower down! 'After an absence of thirty-five minutes the jury found the prisoner guilty of murder, with a recommendation to mercy. The judge assumed the black cap and pronounced sentence of death, saying that he would forward the recommendation to the proper quarter.'"

Cyril returned. "Not yet!" he was saying—when he saw the paper lying on the counter. His crest fell.

Long after the shop was shut, Constance and Cyril waited in the parlour for the arrival of the master of the house. Constance was in the blackest despair. She saw nothing but death around her. She thought: misfortunes never come singly. Why did not Samuel come? All was ready for him, everything that her imagination could suggest, in the way of food, remedies, and the means of

warmth. Amy was not allowed to go to bed, lest she might be needed. Constance did not even hint that Cyril should go to bed. The dark, dreadful minutes ticked themselves off on the mantelpiece until only five minutes separated Constance from the moment when she would not know what to do next. It was twenty-five minutes past eleven. If at half-past Samuel did not appear, then he could not come that night, unless the last train from Stafford was inconceivably late.

The sound of a carriage! It ceased at the door. Mother and son sprang up.

Yes, it was Samuel! She beheld him once more. And the sight of his condition, moral and physical, terrified her. His great strapping son and Amy helped him upstairs. "Will he ever come down those stairs again?" This thought lanced Constance's heart. The pain was come and gone in a moment, but it had surprised her tranquil commonsense, which was naturally opposed to, and gently scornful of, hysterical fears. As she puffed, with her stoutness, up the stairs, that bland cheerfulness of hers cost her an immense effort of will. She was profoundly troubled; great disasters seemed to be slowly approaching her from all quarters.

Should she send for the doctor? No. To do so would only be a concession to the panic instinct. She knew exactly what was the matter with Samuel: a severe cough persistently neglected, no more. As she had expressed herself many times to inquirers, "He's never been what you may call ill." Nevertheless, as she laid him in bed and possetted him, how frail and fragile he looked! And he was so exhausted that he would not even talk about the trial.

"If he's not better to-morrow I *shall* send for the

doctor!" she said to herself. As for his getting up, she swore she would keep him in bed by force if necessary.

#### IV.

The next morning she was glad and proud that she had not yielded to a scare. For he was most strangely and obviously better. He had slept heavily, and she had slept a little. True that Daniel was condemned to death! Leaving Daniel to his fate, she was conscious of joy springing in her heart. How absurd to have asked herself: "Will he ever come down those stairs again?"!

A message reached her from the forgotten shop during the morning, that Mr. Lawton had called to see Mr. Povey. The idea of a petition to the Home Secretary took shape at this interview, and before the day was out it had spread over the town and over the Five Towns, and it was in the *Signal*. The *Signal* spoke of Daniel Povey as "the condemned man." And the phrase startled the whole district into an indignant agitation for his reprieve. The district woke up to the fact that a Town Councillor, a figure in the world, an honest tradesman of unspotted character, was cooped solitary in a little cell at Stafford, waiting to be hanged by the neck till he was dead.

However, there was nothing to fear. No Home Secretary would dare to run counter to the jury's recommendation and the expressed wish of the whole district. Besides, the Home Secretary's nephew was M.P. for the Knype division. Of course a verdict of guilty had been inevitable. Everybody recognised that now. Even Samuel and all the hottest partisans of Daniel Povey recognised it. They talked as if they had always foreseen it, directly

contradicting all that they had said on only the previous day. Without any sense of any inconsistency or of shame, they took up an absolutely new position. The structure of blind faith had once again crumbled at the assault of realities, and unhealthy, un-English truths, the statement of which would have meant ostracism twenty-four hours earlier, became suddenly the platitudes of the Square and the market-place.

The prime movers in the petition felt that Daniel Povey was as good as saved. Hundreds of forms were printed to receive signatures, and these forms, together with copies of the petition, were laid on the counters of all the principal shops, not merely in Bursley, but in the other towns. They were also to be found at the offices of the *Signal*, in railway waiting-rooms, and in the various reading-rooms; and on the second of Daniel's three Sundays they were exposed in the porches of churches and chapels. Chapel-keepers and vergers would come to Samuel and ask with the heavy inertia of their stupidity: "About pens and ink, sir?" These officials had the air of audaciously disturbing the sacrosanct routine of centuries in order to confer a favour.

Samuel continued to improve. His cough shook him less, and his appetite increased. Constance allowed him to establish himself in the drawing-room, which was next to the bedroom, and of which the grate was particularly efficient. Here, in an old winter overcoat, he directed the vast affair of the petition, which grew daily to vaster proportions. Samuel dreamed of twenty thousand signatures. Each sheet held twenty signatures, and several times a day he counted the sheets; the supply of forms actually failed once, and Constance herself had to hurry

to the printers to order more. Samuel was put into a passion by this carelessness of the printers'.

When Samuel had received a thousand sheets with twenty thousand signatures, he set his heart on twenty-five thousand signatures. And he also announced his firm intention of accompanying young Lawton to London with the petition. The petition had, in fact, become one of the most remarkable petitions of modern times. So the *Signal* said. The *Signal* gave a daily account of its progress, and its progress was astonishing. In certain streets every householder had signed it. The first sheets had been reserved for the signatures of members of Parliament, ministers of religion, civic dignitaries, justices of the peace, etc. These sheets were nobly filled. The aged Rector of Bursley signed first of all; after him the Mayor of Bursley, as was right; then sundry M.P.'s.

Samuel emerged from the drawing-room. He went into the parlour, and, later, into the shop; and no evil consequence followed. His cough was nearly, but not quite, cured. The weather was extraordinarily mild for the season. He repeated that he should go with the petition to London; and he went; Constance could not validly oppose the journey. She, too, was a little intoxicated by the petition. It weighed considerably over a hundredweight. The crowning signature, that of the M.P. for Knype, was duly obtained in London, and Samuel's one disappointment was that his hope of twenty-five thousand signatures had fallen short of realisation—by only a few score. The few score could have been got had not time urgently pressed. He returned from London a man of mark, full of confidence; but his cough was worse again.

His confidence in the power of public opinion and the

inherent virtue of justice might have proved to be well placed, had not the Home Secretary happened to be one of your humane officials. The Marquis of Welwyn was celebrated through every stratum of the governing classes for his humane instincts, which were continually fighting against his sense of duty. Unfortunately his sense of duty, which he had inherited from several centuries of ancestors, made havoc among his humane instincts on nearly every occasion of conflict. It was reported that he suffered horribly in consequence. Others also suffered, for he was never known to advise a remission of a sentence of flogging. Certain capital sentences he had commuted, but he did not commute Daniel Povey's. He could not permit himself to be influenced by a wave of popular sentiment, and assuredly not by his own nephew's signature. He gave to the case the patient, remorseless examination which he gave to every case. He spent a sleepless night in trying to discover a reason for yielding to his humane instincts, but without success. As Judge Lindley remarked in his confidential report, the sole arguments in favour of Daniel were provocation and his previous high character; and these were no sort of an argument. The provocation was utterly inadequate, and the previous high character was quite too ludicrously beside the point. So once more the Marquis's humane instincts were routed and he suffered horribly.

## V.

On the Sunday morning after the day on which the *Signal* had printed the *menu* of Daniel Povey's supreme breakfast, and the exact length of the "drop" which the executioner had administered to him, Constance and Cyril

stood together at the window of the large bedroom. The boy was in his best clothes; but Constance's garments gave no sign of the Sabbath. She wore a large apron over an old dress that was rather tight for her. She was pale and looked ill.

"Oh, mother!" Cyril exclaimed suddenly. "Listen! I'm sure I can hear the band."

She checked him with a soundless movement of her lips; and they both glanced anxiously at the silent bed, Cyril with a gesture of apology for having forgotten that he must make no noise.

The strains of the band came from down King Street, in the direction of St. Luke's Church. The music appeared to linger a long time in the distance, and then it approached, growing louder, and the Bursley Town Silver Prize Band passed under the window at the solemn pace of Handel's "Dead March." The effect of that requiem, heavy with its own inherent beauty and with the vast weight of harrowing tradition, was to wring the tears from Constance's eyes; they fell on her aproned bosom, and she sank into a chair. And though the cheeks of the trumpeters were puffed out, and though the drummer had to protrude his stomach and arch his spine backwards lest he should tumble over his drum, there was majesty in the passage of the band. The boom of the drum, desolating the interruptions of the melody, made sick the heart, but with a lofty grief; and the dirge seemed to be weaving a purple pall that covered every meanness.

The bandsmen were not all in black, but they all wore crape on their sleeves and their instruments were knotted with crape. They carried in their hats a black-edged card. Cyril held one of these cards in his hands. It ran thus:

SACRED TO THE MEMORY OF  
DANIEL POVEY

A TOWN COUNCILLOR OF THIS TOWN  
JUDICIALLY MURDERED AT 8 O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING  
8TH FEBRUARY 1888

"HE WAS MORE SINNED AGAINST THAN SINNING."

In the wake of the band came the aged Rector, bare-headed, and wearing a surplice over his overcoat; his thin white hair was disarranged by the breeze was played in the chilly sunshine; his hands were folded on a gilt-edged book. A curate, churchwardens, and sidesmen followed. And after these, tramping through the dark mud in a procession that had apparently no end, wound the unofficial male multitude, nearly all in mourning, and all, save the more aristocratic, carrying the memorial card in their hats. Loafers, women, and children had collected on the drying pavements, and a window just opposite Constance was ornamented with the entire family of the landlord of the Sun Vaults. In the great bar of the Vaults a barman was craning over the pitch-pine screen that secured privacy to drinkers. The procession continued without break, eternally rising over the verge of King Street "bank," and eternally vanishing round the corner into St. Luke's Square; at intervals it was punctuated by a clergyman, a Nonconformist minister, a town-crier, a group of foremen, or a few Rifle Volunteers. The watching crowd grew as the procession lengthened. Then another band was heard, also playing the march from *Saul*. The first band had now reached the top of the Square, and was scarcely audible from King Street. The reiterated glitter in the sun of memorial cards in hats



gave the fanciful illusion of an impossible whitish snake that was straggling across the town. Three-quarters of an hour elapsed before the tail of the snake came into view, and a rabble of unkempt boys closed in upon it, filling the street.

"I shall go to the drawing-room window, mother," said Cyril.

She nodded. He crept out of the bedroom.

St. Luke's Square was a sea of hats and memorial cards. Most of the occupiers of the Square had hung out flags at half-mast, and a flag at half-mast was flying over the Town Hall in the distance. Sightseers were at every window. The two bands had united at the top of the Square; and behind them, on a North Staffordshire Railway lorry, stood the white-clad Rector and several black figures. The Rector was speaking; but only those close to the lorry could hear his feeble treble voice.

Such was the massive protest of Bursley against what Bursley regarded as a callous injustice. The execution of Daniel Povey had most genuinely excited the indignation of the town. That execution was not only an injustice; it was an insult, a humiliating snub. And the worst was that the rest of the country had really discovered no sympathetic interest in the affair. Certain London papers, indeed, in commenting casually on the execution, had slurred the morals and manners of the Five Towns, professing to regard the district as notoriously beyond the realm of the Ten Commandments. This had helped to render furious the townsmen. This, as much as anything, had encouraged the spontaneous outburst of feeling which had culminated in a St. Luke's Square full of people with memorial cards in their hats. The demonstration had scarcely been organised; it had somehow organised itself,

employing the places of worship and a few clubs as centres of gathering. And it proved an immense success. There were seven or eight thousand people in the Square, and the pity was that England as a whole could not have had a glimpse of the spectacle. Since the execution of the elephant, nothing had so profoundly agitated Bursley. Constance, who left the bedroom momentarily for the drawing-room, reflected that the death and burial of Cyril's honoured grandfather, though a resounding event, had not caused one-tenth of the stir which she beheld. But then John Baines had killed nobody.

The Rector spoke too long; everyone felt that. But at length he finished. The bands performed the Doxology, and the immense multitudes began to disperse by the eight streets that radiate from the Square. At the same time one o'clock struck, and the public-houses opened with their customary admirable promptitude. Respectable persons, of course, ignored the public-houses and hastened homewards to a delayed dinner. But in a town of over thirty thousand souls there are sufficient dregs to fill all the public-houses on an occasion of ceremonial excitement. Constance saw the bar of the Vaults crammed with individuals whose sense of decent fitness was imperfect. The barman and the landlord and the principal members of the landlord's family were hard put to it to quench that funereal thirst. Constance, as she ate a little meal in the bedroom, could not but witness the orgy. A bandsman with his silver instrument was prominent at the counter. At five minutes to three the Vaults spewed forth a squirt of roysterers who walked on the pavement as on a tight-rope; among them was the bandsman, his silver instrument only half enveloped in its bag of green serge. He established an equilibrium in the gutter. It would

not have mattered so seriously if he had not been a bandsman. The barman and the landlord pushed the ultimate sot by force into the street and bolted the door (till six o'clock) just as a policeman strolled along, the first policeman of the day. It became known that similar scenes were enacting at the thresholds of other inns. And the judicious were sad.

## VI.

When the altercation between the policeman and the musician in the gutter was at its height, Samuel Povey became restless; but since he had scarcely stirred through the performances of the bands, it was probably not the cries of the drunkard that had aroused him.

He had shown very little interest in the preliminaries of the great demonstration. The flame of his passion for the case of Daniel Povey seemed to have shot up on the day before the execution, and then to have expired. On that day he went to Stafford in order, by permit of the prison governor, to see his cousin for the last time. His condition then was undoubtedly not far removed from monomania. "Unhinged" was the conventional expression which frequently rose in Constance's mind as a description of the mind of her husband; but she fought it down; she would not have it; it was too crude—with its associations. She would only admit that the case had "got on" his mind. A startling proof of this was that he actually suggested taking Cyril with him to see the condemned man. He wished Cyril to see Daniel; he said gravely that he thought Cyril ought to see him. The proposal was monstrous, inexplicable—or explicable only by the assumption that his mind, while not unhinged, had tem-

porarily lost its balance. Constance opposed an absolute negative, and Samuel being in every way enfeebled, she overcame. As for Cyril, he was divided between fear and curiosity. On the whole, perhaps Cyril regretted that he would not be able to say at school that he had had speech with the most celebrated killer of the age on the day before his execution.

Samuel returned hysterical from Stafford. His account of the scene, which he gave in a very loud voice, was a most absurd and yet pathetic recital, obviously distorted by memory. When he came to the point of the entrance of Dick Povey, who was still at the hospital, and who had been specially driven to Stafford and carried into the prison, he wept without restraint. His hysteria was painful in a very high degree.

He went to bed—of his own accord, for his cough had improved again. And on the following day, the day of the execution, he remained in bed till the afternoon. In the evening the Rector sent for him to the Rectory to discuss the proposed demonstration. On the next day, Saturday, he said he should not get up. Icy showers were sweeping the town, and his cough was worse after the evening visit to the Rector. Constance had no apprehensions about him. The most dangerous part of the winter was over, and there was nothing now to force him into indiscretions. She said to herself calmly that he should stay in bed as long as he liked, that he could not have too much repose after the cruel fatigues, physical and spiritual, which he had suffered. His cough was short, but not as troublesome as in the past; his face flushed, dusky, and settled in gloom; and he was slightly feverish, with quick pulse and quick breathing—the symptoms of a renewed cold. He passed a wakeful night,

broken by brief dreams in which he talked. At dawn he had some hot food, asked what day it was, frowned, and seemed to doze off at once. At eleven o'clock he had refused food. And he had intermittently dozed during the progress of the demonstration and its orgiastic sequel.

Constance had food ready for his waking, and she approached the bed and leaned over him. The fever had increased somewhat, the breathing was more rapid, and his lips were covered with tiny purple pimples. He feebly shook his head, with a disgusted air, at her mention of food. It was this obstinate refusal of food which first alarmed her. A little uncomfortable suspicion shot up in her: Surely there's nothing the *matter* with him?

Something—impossible to say what—caused her to bend still lower, and put her ear to his chest. She heard within that mysterious box a rapid succession of thin, dry, crackling sounds: sounds such as she would have produced by rubbing her hair between her fingers close to her ear. The crepitation ceased, then recommenced, and she perceived that it coincided with the intake of his breath. He coughed; the sounds were intensified; a spasm of pain ran over his face; and he put his damp hand to his side.

"Pain in my side!" he whispered with difficulty.

Constance stepped into the drawing-room, where Cyril was sketching by the fire.

"Cyril," she said, "go across and ask Dr. Harrop to come round at once. And if he isn't in, then his new partner."

"Is it for father?"

"Yes."

"What's the matter?"

"Now do as I say, please," said Constance, sharply,

adding: "I don't know what's the matter. Perhaps nothing. But I'm not satisfied."

The venerable Harrop pronounced the word "pneumonia." It was acute double pneumonia that Samuel had got. During the three worst months of the year, he had escaped the fatal perils which await a man with a flat chest and a chronic cough, who ignores his condition and defies the weather. But a journey of five hundred yards to the Rectory had been one journey too many. The Rectory was so close to the shop that he had not troubled to wrap himself up as for an excursion to Stafford. He survived the crisis of the disease and then died of toxæmia, caused by a heart that would not do its duty by the blood. A casual death, scarce noticed in the reaction after the great febrile demonstration! Besides, Samuel Povey never could impose himself on the burgesses. He lacked individuality. He was little. I have often laughed at Samuel Povey. But I liked and respected him. He was a very honest man. I have always been glad to think that, at the end of his life, destiny took hold of him and displayed, to the observant, the vein of greatness which runs through every soul without exception. He embraced a cause, lost it, and died of it.

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## CHAPTER VI.

## THE WIDOW.

## I.

CONSTANCE, alone in the parlour, stood expectant by the set tea-table. She was not wearing weeds; her mother and she, on the death of her father, had talked of the various disadvantages of weeds; her mother had worn them unwillingly, and only because a public opinion not sufficiently advanced had intimidated her. Constance had said: "If ever I'm a widow I won't wear them," positively, in the tone of youth; and Mrs. Baines had replied: "I hope you won't, my dear."

This was the first Monday after Samuel's funeral. Existence in the house had been resumed on the plane which would henceforth be the normal plane. Constance had put on for tea a dress of black silk with a jet brooch of her mother's. Her hands, just meticulously washed, had that feeling of being dirty which comes from roughening of the epidermis caused by a day spent in fingering stuffs. She had been "going through" Samuel's things, and her own, and ranging all anew. It was astonishing how little the man had collected, of "things," in the course of over half a century. But Samuel had not the mania for owning. Constance put his clothes in a box, to be given away gradually (all except an overcoat and handkerchiefs which might do for Cyril); she locked up

the watch and its black cord, the spectacles and the scarf-ring; she gave the gold studs to Cyril; she climbed on a chair and hid the cigar-box on the top of her wardrobe; and scarce a trace of Samuel remained!

By his own wish the funeral had been as simple and private as possible. One or two distant relations, whom Constance scarcely knew and who would probably not visit her again until she too was dead, came—and went. And lo! the affair was over. The simple celerity of the funeral would have satisfied even Samuel, whose tremendous self-esteem hid itself so effectually behind such externals that nobody had ever fully perceived it. Not even Constance quite knew Samuel's secret opinion of Samuel. Constance was aware that he had a ridiculous side, that his greatest lack had been a lack of spectacular dignity. Even in the coffin, where nevertheless most people are finally effective, he had not been imposing—with his finicky little grey beard persistently sticking up.

The vision of him in his coffin—there in the churchyard, just at the end of King Street!—with the lid screwed down on that unimportant beard, recurred frequently in the mind of the widow, as something untrue and misleading. She had to say to herself: "Yes, he is really there! And that is why I have this particular feeling in my heart." She saw him as an object pathetic and wistful, not majestic. And yet she genuinely thought that there could not exist another husband quite so honest, quite so just, quite so reliable, quite so good, as Samuel had been. What a conscience he had! How he would try, and try, to be fair with her! Twenty years she could remember, of ceaseless, constant endeavour on his part to behave rightly to her! She could recall many an occasion when he had obviously checked himself, striving against



his tendency to cold abruptness and to sullenness, in order to give her the respect due to a wife. What loyalty was his! How she could *depend* on him! How much better he was than herself (she thought with modesty)!

His death was an amputation for her. But she faced it with calmness. She was not bowed with sorrow. She did not nurse the idea that her life was at an end; on the contrary, she obstinately put it away from her, dwelling on Cyril. She did not indulge in the enervating voluptuousness of grief. She had begun in the first hours of bereavement by picturing herself as one marked out for the blows of fate. She had lost her father and her mother, and now her husband. Her career seemed to be punctuated by interments. But after awhile her gentle commonsense came to insist that most human beings lose their parents, and that every marriage must end in either a widower or a widow, and that all careers are punctuated by interments. Had she had not nearly twenty-one years of happy married life? (Twenty-one years—rolled up! The sudden thought of their naïve ignorance of life, hers and his, when they were first married, brought tears into her eyes. How wise and experienced she was now!) And had she not Cyril? Compared to many women, she was indeed very fortunate.

The one visitation which had been specially hers was the disappearance of Sophia. And yet even that was not worse than the death outright of Sophia, was perhaps not so bad. For Sophia might return out of the darkness. The blow of Sophia's flight had seemed unique when it was fresh, and long afterwards; had seemed to separate the Baines family from all other families in a particular shame. But at the age of forty-three Constance had learnt

that such events are not uncommon in families, and strange sequels to them not unknown. Thinking often of Sophia, she hoped wildly and frequently.

She looked at the clock; she had a little spasm of nervousness lest Cyril might fail to keep his word on that first day of their new regular life together. And at the instant he burst into the room, invading it like an armed force, having previously laid waste the shop in his passage.

"I'm not late, mother! I'm not late!" he cried proudly.

She smiled warmly, happy in him, drawing out of him balm and solace. He did not know that in that stout familiar body before him was a sensitive, trembling soul that clutched at him ecstatically as the one reality in the universe. He did not know that that evening meal, partaken of without hurry after school had released him to her, was to be the ceremonial sign of their intimate unity and their interdependence, a tender and delicious proof that they were "all in all to each other": he saw only his tea, for which he was hungry—just as hungry as though his father were not scarcely yet cold in the grave.

After tea, she regretfully left him, at his home-lessons, in order to go into the shop. The shop was the great unsolved question. What was she to do with the shop? Was she to continue the business or to sell it? With the fortunes of her father and her aunt, and the economies of twenty years, she had more than sufficient means. She was indeed rich, according to the standards of the Square; nay, wealthy! Therefore she was under no material compulsion to keep the shop. Moreover, to keep it would mean personal superintendence and the burden of res-

possibility, from which her calm lethargy shrank. On the other hand, to dispose of the business would mean the breaking of ties and leaving the premises: and from this also she shrank. Young Lawton, without being asked, had advised her to sell. But she did not want to sell. She wanted the impossible: that matters should proceed in the future as in the past, that Samuel's death should change nothing save in her heart.

In the meantime Miss Insull was priceless. Constance thoroughly understood one side of the shop; but Miss Insull understood both, and the finance of it also. Miss Insull could have directed the establishment with credit, if not with brilliance. She was indeed directing it at that moment. Constance, however, felt jealous of Miss Insull; she was conscious of a slight antipathy towards the faithful one. She did not care to be "in the hands" of Miss Insull.

There were one or two customers at the millinery counter. They greeted her with a deplorable copiousness of tact. Most tactfully they avoided any reference to Constance's loss; but by their tone, their glances, at Constance and at each other, and their heroically restrained sighs, they spread desolation as though they had been spreading ashes instead of butter on bread. The assistants, too, had a special demeanour for the poor lone widow which was excessively trying to her. She wished to be natural, and she would have succeeded, had they not all of them apparently conspired together to make her task impossible.

She moved away to the other side of the shop, to Samuel's desk, at which he used to stand, staring absently out of the little window into King Street while murmurously casting figures. She lighted the gas-jet

there, arranged the light exactly to suit her, and then lifted the large flap of the desk and drew forth some account-books.

"Miss Insull!" she called, in a low, clear voice, with a touch of haughtiness and a touch of command in it. The pose, a comical contradiction of Constance's benevolent character, was deliberately adopted; it illustrated the effects of jealousy on even the softest disposition.

Miss Insull responded. She had no alternative but to respond. And she gave no sign of resenting her employer's attitude. But then Miss Insull seldom did give any sign of being human.

The customers departed, one after another, obsequiously sped by the assistants, who thereupon lowered the gases somewhat, according to sæcular rule; and in the dim eclipse, as they restored boxes to shelves, they could hear the tranquil, regular, half-whispered conversation of the two women at the desk, discussing accounts; and then the chink of gold.

Suddenly there was an irruption. One of the assistants sprang instinctively to the gas; but on perceiving that the disturber of peace was only a slatternly girl, hatless and imperfectly clean, she decided to leave the gas as it was, and put on a condescending, suspicious demeanour.

"If you please, can I speak to the missis?" said the girl, breathlessly.

She seemed to be about eighteen years of age, fat and plain. Her blue frock was torn, and over it she wore a rough brown apron, caught up at one corner to the waist. Her bare fore-arms were of brick-red colour.

"What is it?" demanded the assistant.

Miss Insull looked over her shoulder across the shop.

"It must be Maggie's—Mrs. Hollins's daughter!" said Miss Insull under her breath.

"What can she want?" said Constance, leaving the desk instantly; and to the girl, who stood sturdily holding her own against the group of assistants: "You are Mrs. Hollins's daughter, aren't you?"

"Yes, mum."

"What's your name?"

"Maggie, mum. And, if you please, mother's sent me to ask if you'll kindly give her a funeral card."

"A funeral card?"

"Yes. Of Mr. Povey. She's been expecting of one, and she thought as how perhaps you'd forgotten it, especially as she wasn't asked to the funeral."

The girl stopped.

Constance perceived that by mere negligence she had seriously wounded the feelings of Maggie, senior. The truth was, she had never thought of Maggie. She ought to have remembered that funeral cards were almost the sole ornamentation of Maggie's abominable cottage.

"Certainly," she replied after a pause. "Miss Insull, there are a few cards left in the desk, aren't there? Please put me one in an envelope for Mrs. Hollins."

## II.

When the shop had been closed, under her own critical and precise superintendence, she extinguished the last gas in it and returned to the parlour, wondering where she might discover some entirely reliable man or boy to deal with the shutters night and morning. Samuel

had ordinarily dealt with the shutters himself, and on extraordinary occasions and during holidays Miss Insull and one of her subordinates had struggled with their unwieldiness. But the extraordinary occasion had now become ordinary, and Miss Insull could not be expected to continue indefinitely in the functions of a male. Constance had a mind to engage an errand-boy, a luxury against which Samuel had always set his face. She did not dream of asking the herculean Cyril to open and shut shop.

He had apparently finished his home-lessons. The books were pushed aside, and he was sketching in lead-pencil on a drawing-block. To the right of the fireplace, over the sofa, there hung an engraving after Landseer, showing a lonely stag paddling into a lake. The stag at eve had drunk or was about to drink his fill, and Cyril was copying him. He had already indicated a flight of birds in the middle distance; vague birds on the wing being easier than detailed stags, he had begun with the birds.

Constance put a hand on his shoulder. "Finished your lessons?" she murmured caressingly.

Before speaking, Cyril gazed up at the picture with a frowning, busy expression, and then replied in an absent-minded voice:

"Yes." And after a pause: "Except my arithmetic. I shall do that in the morning before breakfast."

"Oh, Cyril!" she protested.

It had been a positive ordinance, for a long time past, that there should be no sketching until lessons were done. In his father's lifetime Cyril had never dared to break it.

He bent over his block, feigning an intense absorption,

Constance's hand slipped from his shoulder. She wanted to command him formally to resume his lessons. But she could not. She feared an argument; she mistrusted herself. And, moreover, it was so soon after his father's death!

"You know you won't have time to-morrow morning!" she said weakly.

"Oh, mother!" he retorted superiorly. "Don't worry." And then, in a cajoling tone: "I've wanted to do that stag for ages."

She sighed and sat down in her rocking-chair. He went on sketching, rubbing out, and making queer expostulatory noises against his pencil, or against the difficulties needlessly invented by Sir Edwin Landseer. Once he rose and changed the position of the gas-bracket, staring fiercely at the engraving as though it had committed a sin.

Amy came to lay the supper. He did not acknowledge that she existed.

"Now, Master Cyril, after you with that table, if you please!" She announced herself brusquely, with the privilege of an old servant and a woman who would never see thirty again.

"What a nuisance you are, Amy!" he gruffly answered. "Look here, mother, can't Amy lay the cloth on that half of the table? I'm right in the middle of my drawing. There's plenty of room there for two."

He seemed not to be aware that, in the phrase "plenty of room for two," he had made a callous reference to their loss. The fact was, there *was* plenty of room for two.

Constance said quickly: "Very well, Amy. For this once."

Amy grunted, but obeyed.

Constance had to summon him twice from art to nourishment. He ate with rapidity, frequently regarding the picture with half-shut, searching eyes. When he had finished, he refilled his glass with water, and put it next to his sketching-block.

"You surely aren't thinking of beginning to paint at this time of night!" Constance exclaimed, astonished.

"Oh *yes*, mother!" he fretfully appealed. "It's not late."

Another positive ordinance of his father's had been that there should be nothing after supper except bed. Nine o'clock was the latest permissible moment for going to bed. It was now less than a quarter to.

"It only wants twelve minutes to nine," Constance pointed out.

"Well, what if it does?"

"Now, Cyril," she said, "I do hope you are going to be a good boy, and not cause your mother anxiety."

But she said it too kindly.

He said sullenly: "I do think you might let me finish it. I've begun it. It won't take me long."

She made the mistake of leaving the main point. "How can you possibly choose your colours properly by gas-light?" she said.

"I'm going to do it in sepia," he replied in triumph.

"It mustn't occur again," she said.

He thanked God for a good supper, and sprang to the harmonium, where his paint-box was. Amy cleared away. Constance did crochet-work. There was silence. The clock struck nine, and it also struck half-past nine. She warned him repeatedly. At ten minutes to ten she said persuasively:



"Now, Cyril, when the clock strikes ten I shall really put the gas out."

The clock struck ten.

"Half a mo, half a mo!" he cried. "I've done! I've done!"

Her hand was arrested.

Another four minutes elapsed, and then he jumped up. "There you are!" he said proudly, showing her the block. And all his gestures were full of grace and cajolery.

"Yes, it's very good," Constance said, rather indifferently.

"I don't believe you care for it!" he accused her, but with a bright smile.

"I care for your health," she said. "Just look at that clock!"

He sat down in the other rocking-chair, deliberately.

"Now, Cyril!"

"Well, mother, I suppose you'll let me take my boots off!" He said it with teasing good-humour.

When he kissed her good night, she wanted to cling to him, so affectionate was his kiss; but she could not throw off the habits of restraint which she had been originally taught and had all her life practised. She keenly regretted the inability.

In her bedroom, alone, she listened to his movements as he undressed. The door between the two rooms was unlatched. She had to control a desire to open it ever so little and peep at him. He would not have liked that. He could have enriched her heart beyond all hope, and at no cost to himself; but he did not know his power. As she could not cling to him with her hands, she clung to him with that heart of hers, while moving sedately up and down the room, alone. And her eyes saw him through

the solid wood of the door. At last she got heavily into bed. She thought with placid anxiety, in the dark: "I shall have to be firm with Cyril." And she thought also, simultaneously: "He really must be a good boy. He *must*." And clung to him passionately, without shame! Lying alone there in the dark, she could be as unrestrained and girlish as her heart chose. When she loosed her hold she instantly saw the boy's father arranged in his coffin, or flitting about the room. Then she would hug that vision too, for the pleasure of the pain it gave her.

### III.

She was reassured as to Cyril during the next few days. He did not attempt to repeat his ingenious naughtiness of the Monday evening, and he came directly home for tea; moreover he had, as a kind of miracle performed to dazzle her, actually arisen early on the Tuesday morning and done his arithmetic.

Cyril, she thought, had realised the importance in her eyes of tea, of that evening hour and that companionship which were for her the flowering of the day. And she had such confidence in his goodness that she would pour the boiling water on the Horniman tea-leaves even before he arrived: certainty could not be more sure. And then, on the Friday of the first week, he was late! He bounded in, after dark, and the state of his clothes indicated too clearly that he had been playing football in the mud that was a grassy field in summer.

"Have you been kept in, my boy?" she asked, for the sake of form.

"No, mother," he said casually. "We were just kicking the ball about a bit. Am I late?"

"Better go and tidy yourself," she said, not replying to his question. "You can't sit down in that state. And I'll have some fresh tea made. This is spoilt."

"Oh, very well!"

Her sacred tea—the institution which she wanted to hallow by long habit, and which was to count before everything with both of them—had been carelessly sacrificed to the kicking of a football in mud! And his father buried not ten days! She was wounded: a deep, clean, dangerous wound that would not bleed. She tried to be glad that he had not lied; he might easily have lied, saying that he had been detained for a fault and could not help being late. No! He was not given to lying; he would lie, like any human being, when a great occasion demanded such prudence, but he was not a liar; he might fairly be called a truthful boy. She tried to be glad, and did not succeed. She would have preferred him to have lied.

Amy, grumbling, had to boil more water.

When he returned to the parlour, superficially cleaned, Constance expected him to apologise in his roundabout boyish way; at any rate to woo and wheedle her, to show by some gesture that he was conscious of having put an affront on her. But his attitude was quite otherwise. His attitude was rather brusque and overbearing and noisy. He ate a very considerable amount of jam, far too quickly, and then asked for more, in a tone of a monarch who calls for his own. And ere tea was finished he said boldly, apropos of nothing.

"I say, mother, you'll just have to let me go to the School of Art after Easter."

And stared at her with a fixed challenge in his eyes.

"You know what your father said!" Constance replied.

"But, mother! That's all very well! I'm sure father would have agreed. If I'm going to take up drawing I ought to do it at once. That's what the drawing-master says, and I suppose he ought to know." He finished on a tone of insolence.

"I can't allow you to do it yet," said Constance, quietly "It's quite out of the question. Quite!"

He pouted and then he sulked. It was war between them. At times he was the image of his Aunt Sophia. He would not leave the subject alone; but he would not listen to Constance's reasoning. He openly accused her of harshness. He asked her how she could expect him to get on if she thwarted him in his most earnest desires. He pointed to other boys whose parents were wiser.

"It's all very fine of you to put it on father!" he observed sarcastically.

He gave up his drawing entirely.

When she hinted that if he attended the School of Art she would be condemned to solitary evenings, he looked at her as though saying: "Well, and if you are——?" He seemed to have no heart.

After several weeks of intense unhappiness she said: "How many evenings do you want to go?"

The war was over.

He was charming again. When she was alone she could cling to him again. And she said to herself: "If we can be happy together only when I give way to him,

I must give way to him." And there was ecstasy in her yielding. "After all," she said to herself, "perhaps it's very important that he should go to the School of Art." She solaced herself with such thoughts on three solitary evenings a week, waiting for him to come home.

## CHAPTER VII.

## BRICKS AND MORTAR.

## I.

IN the summer of that year the occurrence of a white rash of posters on hoardings and on certain houses and shops, was symptomatic of organic change in the town. The posters were iterations of a mysterious announcement and summons, which began with the august words: "By Order of the Trustees of the late William Clews Mericarp, Esq." Mericarp had been a considerable owner of property in Bursley. After a prolonged residence at Southport, he had died, at the age of eighty-two, leaving his property behind. For sixty years he had been a name, not a figure; and the news of his death, which was assuredly an event, incited the burgesses to gossip, for they had come to regard him as one of the invisible immortals. Constance was shocked, though she had never seen Mericarp. ("Everybody dies nowadays!" she thought.) He owned the Baines-Povey shop, and also Mr. Critchlow's shop. Constance knew not how often her father and, later, her husband, had renewed the lease of those premises that were now hers; but from her earliest recollections rose a vague memory of her father talking to her mother about "Mericarp's rent," which was and always had been a hundred a year. Mericarp had

earned the reputation of being "a good landlord." Constance said sadly: "We shall never have another as good!" When a lawyer's clerk called and asked her to permit the exhibition of a poster in each of her shop-windows, she had misgivings for the future; she was worried; she decided that she would determine the lease next year, so as to be on the safe side; but immediately afterwards she decided that she could decide nothing.

The posters continued: "To be sold by auction, at the Tiger Hotel at six-thirty for seven o'clock precisely." Then, after stating the name and credentials of the auctioneer, the posters at length arrived at the objects to be sold: "All those freehold messuages and shops and copyhold tenements namely." Houses were never sold by auction in Bursley. At moments of auction burgesses were reminded that the erections they lived in were not houses, as they had falsely supposed, but messuages. Having got as far as "namely" the posters ruled a line and began afresh: "Lot 1. All that extensive and commodious shop and messuage with the offices and appurtenances thereto belonging situate and being No. 4 St. Luke's Square in the parish of Bursley in the County of Stafford and at present in the occupation of Mrs. Constance Povey widow under a lease expiring in September 1889." Thus clearly asserting that all Constance's shop was for sale, its whole entirety, and not a fraction or slice of it merely, the posters proceeded: "Lot 2. All that extensive and commodious shop and messuage with the offices and appurtenances thereto belonging situate and being No. 3 St. Luke's Square in the parish of Bursley in the County of Stafford and at present in the occupation of Charles Critchlow chemist under an agreement

for a yearly tenancy." The catalogue ran to fourteen lots.

Within a few hours of the outbreak of the rash, Mr. Critchlow abruptly presented himself before Constance at the millinery counter; he was waving a poster.

"Well!" he exclaimed grimly. "What next, eh?"

"Yes, indeed!" Constance responded.

"Are ye thinking o' buying?" he asked. All the assistants, including Miss Insull, were in hearing, but he ignored their presence.

"Buying!" repeated Constance. "Not me! I've got quite enough house property as it is."

"Shall *you*?" she added, with Mr. Critchlow's own brusqueness.

"Me! Buy property in St. Luke's Square!" Mr. Critchlow sneered. And then left the shop as suddenly as he had entered it.

The sneer at St. Luke's Square was his characteristic expression of an opinion which had been slowly forming for some years. The Square was no longer what it had been, though individual businesses might be as good as ever. For nearly twelve months two shops had been to let in it. And once, bankruptcy had stained its annals. The tradesmen had naturally searched for a cause in every direction save the right one, the obvious one; and naturally they had found a cause. According to the tradesmen, the cause was "this football." The Bursley Football Club had recently swollen into a genuine rival of the ancient supremacy of the celebrated Knype Club. It had transformed itself into a limited company, and rented a ground up the Moorthorne Road, and built a grand stand. The Bursley F. C. had "tied" with the Knype F. C. on the Knype ground—a prodigious achieve-



ment, an achievement which occupied a column of the *Athletic News* one Monday morning! But were the tradesmen civically proud of this glory? No! They said that "this football" drew people out of the town on Saturday afternoons, to the complete abolition of shopping. They said also that people thought of nothing but "this football;" and, nearly in the same breath, that only roughs and good-for-nothings could possibly be interested in such a barbarous game. And they spoke of gate-money, gambling, and professionalism, and the end of all true sport in England. In brief, something new had come to the front and was submitting to the ordeal of the curse.

The sale of the Mericarp estate had a particular interest for respectable stake-in-the-town persons. It would indicate to what extent, if at all, "this football" was ruining Bursley.

Constance mentioned to Cyril that she fancied she might like to go to the sale, and as it was dated for one of Cyril's off-nights Cyril said that he fancied he might like to go too. So they went together; Samuel used to attend property sales, but he had never taken his wife to one. Constance and Cyril arrived at the Tiger shortly after seven o'clock, and were directed to a room furnished and arranged as for a small public meeting of philanthropists. A few gentlemen were already present, but not the instigating trustees, solicitors, and auctioneers. It appeared that "six-thirty for seven o'clock precisely" meant seven-fifteen. Constance took a Windsor chair in the corner nearest the door, and motioned Cyril to the next chair; they dared not speak; they moved on tiptoe; Cyril inadvertently dragged his chair along the floor, and produced a scrunching sound; he blushed, as though

he had desecrated a church, and his mother made a gesture of horror. The remainder of the company glanced at the corner, apparently pained by this negligence.

When the official world arrived, fussy, bustling, bearing documents and a hammer, the general feeling of guilty shame was intensified. Useless for the auctioneer to try to dissipate the gloom by means of bright gestures and quick, cheerful remarks to his supporters! Cyril had an idea that the meeting would open with a hymn, until the apparition of a tapster with wine showed him his error. The auctioneer very particularly enjoined the tapster to see to it that no one lacked for his thirst, and the tapster became self-consciously energetic. He began by choosing Constance for service. In refusing wine, she blushed; then the fellow offered a glass to Cyril, who went scarlet, and mumbled "No" with a lump in his throat; when the tapster's back was turned, he smiled sheepishly at his mother. The majority of the company accepted and sipped. The auctioneer sipped and loudly smacked, and said: "Ah!"

Mr. Critchlow came in.

And the auctioneer said again: "Ah! I'm always glad when the tenants come. That's always a good sign."

He glanced round for approval of this sentiment. But everybody seemed too stiff to move. Even the auctioneer was self-conscious.

"Waiter! Offer wine to Mr. Critchlow!" he exclaimed, bullishly, as if saying: "Man! what on earth are you thinking of, to neglect Mr. Critchlow?"

"Yes, sir; yes, sir," said the waiter, who was dispensing wine as fast as a waiter can.

The auction commenced.

Seizing the hammer, the auctioneer gave a short biography of William Clews Mericarp, and, this pious duty accomplished, called upon a solicitor to read the conditions of sale. The solicitor complied and made a distressing exhibition of self-consciousness. The conditions of sale were very lengthy, and apparently composed in a foreign tongue; and the audience listened to this elocution with a stoical pretence of breathless interest.

Then the auctioneer put up all that extensive and commodious messuage and shop situate and being No. 4, St. Luke's Square. Constance and Cyril moved their limbs surreptitiously, as though being at last found out. The auctioneer referred to John Baines and to Samuel Povey, with a sense of personal loss, and then expressed his pleasure in the presence of "the ladies;" he meant Constance, who once more had to blush.

"Now, gentlemen," said the auctioneer, "what do you say for these famous premises? I think I do not exaggerate when I use the word 'famous.'"

Someone said a thousand pounds, in the terrorised voice of a delinquent.

"A thousand pounds," repeated the auctioneer, paused, sipped, and smacked.

"Guineas," said another voice self-accused of iniquity.

"A thousand and fifty," said the auctioneer.

Then there was a long interval, an interval that tightened the nerves of the assembly.

"Now, ladies and gentlemen," the auctioneer adjured.

The first voice said sulkily: "Eleven hundred."

And thus the bids rose to fifteen hundred, lifted bit by bit, as it were, by the magnetic force of the auctioneer's personality. The man was now standing up, in domina-

tion. He bent down to the solicitor's head; they whispered together.

"Gentlemen," said the auctioneer, "I am happy to inform you that the sale is now open." His tone translated better than words his calm professional beatitude. Suddenly in a voice of wrath he hissed at the waiter: "Waiter, why don't you serve these gentlemen?"

"Yes, sir; yes, sir."

The auctioneer sat down and sipped at leisure, chatting with his clerk and the solicitor and the solicitor's clerk.

When he rose it was as a conqueror. "Gentlemen, fifteen hundred is bid. Now, Mr. Critchlow."

Mr. Critchlow shook his head. The auctioneer threw a courteous glance at Constance, who avoided it.

After many adjurations, he reluctantly raised his hammer, pretended to let it fall, and saved it several times.

And then Mr. Critchlow said: "And fifty."

"Fifteen hundred and fifty is bid," the auctioneer informed the company, electrifying the waiter once more. And when he had sipped he said, with feigned sadness: "Come, gentlemen, you surely don't mean to let this magnificent lot go for fifteen hundred and fifty pounds?"

But they did mean that.

The hammer fell, and the auctioneer's clerk and the solicitor's clerk took Mr. Critchlow aside and wrote with him.

Nobody was surprised when Mr. Critchlow bought Lot No. 2, his own shop.

The sale demonstrated that football had not entirely

undermined the commercial basis of society in Bursley; only two Lots had to be withdrawn.

## II.

On Thursday afternoon of the same week the youth whom Constance had ended by hiring for the manipulation of shutters and other jobs unsuitable for fragile women, was closing the shop. The clock had struck two. All the shutters were up except the last one, in the midst of the doorway. Miss Insull and her mistress were walking about the darkened interior, putting dust-sheets well over the edges of exposed goods; the other assistants had just left. The bull-terrier had wandered into the shop as he almost invariably did at closing time—for he slept there, an efficient guard—and had lain down by the dying stove; though not venerable, he was stiffening into age.

"You can shut," said Miss Insull to the youth.

But as the final shutter was ascending to its position, Mr. Critchlow appeared on the pavement.

"Hold on, young fellow!" Mr. Critchlow commanded, and stepped slowly, lifting up his long apron, over the horizontal shutter on which the perpendicular shutters rested in the doorway.

"Shall you be long, Mr. Critchlow?" the youth asked, posing the shutter. "Or am I to shut?"

"Shut, lad," said Mr. Critchlow, briefly. "I'll go out by th' side-door."

"Here's Mr. Critchlow!" Miss Insull called out to Constance, in a peculiar tone. And a flush, scarcely perceptible, crept very slowly over her dark features. In

the twilight of the shop, lit only by a few starry holes in the shutters, and by the small side-window, not the keenest eye could have detected that flush.

"Mr. Critchlow!" Constance murmured the exclamation. She resented his future ownership of her shop. She thought he was come to play the landlord, and she determined to let him see that her mood was independent and free, that she would as lief give up the business as keep it. In particular she meant to accuse him of having deliberately deceived her as to his intentions on his previous visit.

"Well, missis!" the aged man greeted her. "We've made it up between us. Happen some folk'll think we've taken our time, but I don't know as that's their affair."

His little blinking eyes had a red border. The skin of his pale small face was wrinkled in millions of minute creases. His arms and legs were marvellously thin and sharply angular. The corners of his heliotrope lips were turned down, as usual, in a mysterious comment on the world; and his smile, as he fronted Constance with his excessive height, crowned the mystery.

Constance stared, at a loss. It surely could not after all be true, the substance of the rumours that had floated like vapours in the Square for eight years and more!

"What . . .?" she began.

"Me, and her!" He jerked his head in the direction of Miss Insull.

The dog had leisurely strolled forward to inspect the edges of the *fiance's* trousers. Miss Insull summoned the animal with a noise of fingers, and then bent down and caressed it. A strange gesture proving the validity of

Charles Critchlow's discovery that in Maria Insull a human being was buried!"

Miss Insull was, as near as anyone could guess, forty years of age. For twenty-five years she had served in the shop, passing about twelve hours a day in the shop; attending regularly at least three religious services at the Wesleyan Chapel or School on Sundays, and sleeping with her mother, whom she kept. She had never earned more than thirty shillings a week, and yet her situation was considered to be exceptionally good. In the eternal fusty dusk of the shop she had gradually lost such sexual characteristics and charms as she had once possessed. She was as thin and flat as Charles Critchlow himself. No one knew anything about her, because there was nothing to know. Subtract the shop-assistant from her, and naught remained. Benighted and spiritually dead, she existed by habit.

But for Charles Critchlow she happened to be an illusion. He had cast eyes on her and had seen youth, innocence, virginity. During eight years the moth Charles had flitted round the lamp of her brilliance, and was now singed past escape. He might treat her with what casualness he chose; he might ignore her in public; he might talk brutally about women; he might leave her to wonder dully what he meant, for months at a stretch: but there emerged indisputable from the sum of his conduct the fact that he wanted her. He desired her; she charmed him; she was something ornamental and luxurious for which he was ready to pay—and to commit follies. He had been a widower since before she was born; to him she was a slip of a girl.

"I'm sure I congratulate you both," Constance

breathed, realising the import of Mr. Critchlow's laconic words. "I'm sure I hope you'll be happy."

"That'll be all right," said Mr. Critchlow.

"Thank you, Mrs. Povey," said Maria Insull.

"Ah!" exclaimed Mr. Critchlow, as though himself contemplating anew the situation.

Miss Insull gave the dog a final pat.

"So that's settled," said Mr. Critchlow. "Now, missis, ye want to give up this shop, don't ye?"

"I'm not so sure about that," Constance answered uneasily.

"Don't tell me!" he protested. "Of course ye want to give up the shop."

"I've lived here all my life," said Constance.

"Ye've not lived in th' shop all ye're life. I said th' shop. Listen here!" he continued. "I've got a proposal to make to you. You can keep on the house, and I'll take the shop off ye're hands. Now?" He looked at her inquiringly.

Constance was taken aback by the brusqueness of the suggestion, which, moreover, she did not understand.

"But how——" she faltered.

"Come here," said Mr. Critchlow, impatiently, and he moved towards the house-door of the shop, behind the till.

"Come where? What do you want?" Constance demanded in a maze.

"Here!" said Mr. Critchlow, with increasing impatience. "Follow me, will ye?"



Constance obeyed. Miss Insull sidled after Constance, and the dog after Miss Insull. Mr. Critchlow went through the doorway and down the corridor, past the cutting-out room to his right. The corridor then turned at a right-angle to the left and ended at the parlour door, the kitchen steps being to the left.

Mr. Critchlow stopped short of the kitchen steps, and extended his arms, touching the walls on either side.

"Here!" he said, tapping the walls with his bony knuckles. "Here! Suppose I brick ye this up, and th' same upstairs between th' show-room and th' bedroom passage, ye've got your house to yourself. Ye say ye've lived here all your life. Well, what's to prevent ye finishing up here? The fact is," he added, "it would only be making into two houses again what was two houses to start with, afore your time, missis."

"And what about the shop?" cried Constance.

"Ye can sell us th' stock at a valuation."

Constance suddenly comprehended the scheme. Mr. Critchlow would remain the chemist, while Mrs. Critchlow became the head of the chief drapery business in the town. Doubtless they would knock a hole through the separating wall on the other side, to balance the bricking-up on this side. They must have thought it all out in detail. Constance revolted.

"Yes!" she said, a little disdainfully. "And my goodwill? Shall you take that at a valuation too?"

Mr. Critchlow glanced at the creature for whom he was ready to scatter thousands of pounds. She might have been a Phryne and he the infatuated fool. He glanced

at her as if to say: "We expected this, and this is where we agreed it was to stop."

"Aye!" he said to Constance. "Show me your goodwill. Lap it up in a bit of paper and hand it over, and I'll take it at a valuation. But not afore, missis! Not afore! I'm making ye a very good offer. Twenty pound a year, I'll let ye th' house for. And take th' stock at a valuation. Think it over, my lass."

### III.

Constance's pride urged her to refuse the offer. But in truth her sole objection to it was that she had not thought of the scheme herself. For the scheme really reconciled her wish to remain where she was with her wish to be free of the shop.

"I shall make him put me in a new window in the parlour—one that will open!" she said positively to Cyril, who accepted Mr Critchlow's idea with fatalistic indifference.

After stipulating for the new window, she closed with the offer. Then there was the stock-taking, which endured for weeks. And then a carpenter came and measured for the window. And a builder and a mason came and inspected doorways, and Constance felt that the end was upon her. She took up the carpet in the parlour and protected the furniture by dust-sheets. She and Cyril lived between bare boards and dust-sheets for twenty days, and neither carpenter nor mason reappeared. Then one surprising day the old window was removed by the

carpenter's two journeymen, and late in the afternoon the carpenter brought the new window, and the three men worked till ten o'clock at night, fixing it. Cyril wore his cap and went to bed in his cap, and Constance wore a Paisley shawl. A painter had bound himself beyond all possibility of failure to paint the window on the morrow. He was to begin at six a.m., and Amy's alarm-clock was altered so that she might be up and dressed to admit him. He came a week later, administered one coat, and vanished for another ten days.

Then two masons suddenly came with heavy tools, and were shocked to find that all was not prepared for them. (After three carpetless weeks Constance had relaid her floors.) They tore off wall-paper, sent cascades of plaster down the kitchen steps, withdrew alternate courses of bricks from the walls, and, sated with destruction, hastened away. After four days new red bricks began to arrive, carried by a quite guiltless hodman who had not visited the house before. The hodman met the full storm of Constance's wrath. It was not a vicious wrath, rather a good-humoured wrath; but it impressed the hodman. "My house hasn't been fit to live in for a month," she said in fine. "If these walls aren't built to-morrow, upstairs *and* down—to-morrow, mind!—don't let any of you dare to show your noses here again, for I won't have you. Now you've brought your bricks. Off with you, and tell your master what I say!"

It was effective. The next day subdued and plausible workmen of all sorts awoke the house with knocking at six-thirty precisely, and the two doorways were slowly bricked up. The curious thing was that, when the barrier

was already a foot high on the ground-floor Constance remembered small possessions of her own which she had omitted to remove from the cutting-out room. Picking up her skirts, she stepped over into the region that was no more hers, and stepped back with the goods. She had a bandanna round her head to keep the thick dust out of her hair. She was very busy, very preoccupied with nothings. She had no time for sentimentalities. Yet when the men arrived at the topmost course and were at last hidden behind their own erection, and she could see only rough bricks and mortar, she was disconcertingly overtaken by a misty blindness and could not even see bricks and mortar. Cyril found her, with her absurd bandanna, weeping in a sheet-covered rocking-chair in the sacked parlour. He whistled uneasily, remarked: "I say, mother, what about tea?" and then, hearing the heavy voices of workmen above, ran with relief upstairs. Tea had been set in the drawing-room, he was glad to learn that from Amy, who informed him also that she should "never get used to them there new walls," not as long as she lived.

He went to the School of Art that night. Constance, alone, could find nothing to do. She had willed that the walls should be built, and they had been built; but days must elapse before they could be plastered, and after the plaster still more days before the papering. Not for another month, perhaps, would her house be free of workmen and ripe for her own labours. She could only sit in the dust-drifts and contemplate the havoc of change, and keep her eyes as dry as she could. The legal transactions were all but complete; little bills announcing the transfer of the business lay on the counters in the-shop

at the disposal of customers. In two days Charles Critchlow would pay the price of a desire realised. The sign was painted out and new letters sketched thereon in chalk. In future she would be compelled, if she wished to enter the shop, to enter it as a customer and from the front. Yes, she saw that, though the house remained hers, the root of her life had been wrenched up.

And the mess! It seemed inconceivable that the material mess could ever be straightened away!

Yet, ere the fields of the county were first covered with snow that season, only one sign survived of the devastating revolution, and that was a loose sheet of wall-paper that had been too soon pasted on to new plaster and would not stick. Maria Insull was Maria Critchlow. Constance had been out into the Square and seen the altered sign, and seen Mrs. Critchlow's taste in window-curtains, and seen—most impressive sight of all—that the grimy window of the abandoned room at the top of the abandoned staircase next to the bedroom of her girlhood, had been cleaned and a table put in front of it. She knew that the chamber, which she herself had never entered, was to be employed as a store-room, but the visible proof of its conversion so strangely affected her that she had not felt able to go boldly into the shop, as she had meant to do, and make a few purchases in the way of friendliness. "I'm a silly woman!" she muttered. Later, she did venture, timidly abrupt, into the shop, and was received with fitting state by Mrs. Critchlow (as dessicated as ever), who insisted on allowing her the special trade discount. And she carried her little friendly purchases round to her own door in King Street. Trivial,

trivial event! Constance, not knowing whether to laugh or cry, did both. She accused herself of developing a hysterical faculty in tears, and strove sagely against it.

## CHAPTER VIII.

## THE PROUDEST MOTHER.

## I.

IN the year 1893 there was a new and strange man living at No. 4, St. Luke's Square. Many people remarked on the phenomenon. Very few of his like had ever been seen in Bursley before. One of the striking things about him was the complex way in which he secured himself by means of glittering chains. A chain stretched across his waistcoat, passing through a special button-hole, without a button, in the middle. To this cable were firmly linked a watch at one end and a pencil-case at the other; the chain also served as a protection against a thief who might attempt to snatch the fancy waistcoat entire. Then there were longer chains, beneath the waistcoat, partly designed, no doubt, to deflect bullets, but serving mainly to enable the owner to haul up penknives, cigarette-cases, match-boxes, and key-rings from the profundities of hip-pockets. An essential portion of the man's braces, visible sometimes when he played at tennis, consisted of chain, and the upper and nether halves of his cuff-links were connected by chains. Occasionally he was to be seen chained to a dog.

A reversion, conceivably, to a mediæval type! Yes,

but also the exemplar of the excessively modern! Externally he was a consequence of the fact that, years previously, the leading tailor in Bursley had permitted his son to be apprenticed in London. The father died; the son had the wit to return and make a fortune while creating a new type in the town, a type of which multiple chains were but one feature, and that the least expensive if the most salient. For instance, up to the historic year in which the young tailor created the type, any cap was a cap in Bursley, and any collar was a collar. But thenceforward no cap was a cap, and no collar was a collar, which did not exactly conform in shape and material to certain sacred caps and collars guarded by the young tailor in his back shop. None knew why these sacred caps and collars were sacred, but they were; their sacredness endured for about six months, and then suddenly—again none knew why—they fell from their estate and became lower than offal for dogs, and were supplanted on the altar. The type brought into existence by the young tailor was to be recognised by its caps and collars, and in a similar manner by every other article of attire, except its boots. Unfortunately the tailor did not sell boots, and so imposed on his creatures no mystical creed as to boots. This was a pity, for the boot-makers of the town happened not to be inflamed by the type-creating passion as the tailor was, and thus the new type finished abruptly at the edges of the tailor's trousers.

The man at No. 4, St. Luke's Square had comparatively small and narrow feet, which gave him an advantage; and as he was endowed with a certain vague general physical distinction he managed, despite the eternal untidiness of his hair, to be eminent among the type. As-



at the disposal of customers. In two days Charles Critchlow would pay the price of a desire realised. The sign was painted out and new letters sketched thereon in chalk. In future she would be compelled, if she wished to enter the shop, to enter it as a customer and from the front. Yes, she saw that, though the house remained hers, the root of her life had been wrenched up.

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suredly the frequent sight of him in her house flattered the pride of Constance's eye, which rested on him almost always with pleasure. He had come into the house with startling abruptness soon after Cyril left school and was indentured to the head-designer at "Peel's," that classic earthenware manufactory. The presence of a man in her abode disconcerted Constance at the beginning; but she soon grew accustomed to it, perceiving that a man would behave as a man, and must be expected to do so. This man, in truth, did what he liked in all things. Cyril having always been regarded by both his parents as enormous, one would have anticipated a giant in the new man; but, queerly, he was slim, and little above the average height. Neither in enormity nor in many other particulars did he resemble the Cyril whom he had supplanted. His gestures were lighter and quicker; he had nothing of Cyril's ungainliness; he had not Cyril's limitless taste for sweets, nor Cyril's terrific hatred of gloves, barbers, and soap. He was much more dreamy than Cyril, and much busier. In fact, Constance only saw him at meal-times. He was at Peel's in the day and at the School of Art every night. He would dream during a meal, even; and, without actually saying so, he gave the impression that he was the busiest man in Bursley, wrapped in occupations and pre-occupations as in a blanket—a blanket which Constance had difficulty in penetrating.

Constance wanted to please him; she lived for nothing but to please him; he was, however, exceedingly difficult to please, not in the least because he was hypercritical and exacting, but because he was indifferent. Constance, in order to satisfy her desire of pleasing, had to make

fifty efforts, in the hope that he might chance to notice one. He was a good man, amazingly industrious—when once Constance had got him out of bed in the morning; with no vices; kind, save when Constance mistakenly tried to thwart him; charming, with a curious strain of humour that Constance only half understood. Constance was unquestionably vain about him, and she could honestly find in him little to blame. But whereas he was the whole of her universe, she was merely a dim figure in the background of his. Every now and then, with his gentle, elegant raillery, he would apparently rediscover her, as though saying: "Ah! You're still there, are you?" Constance could not meet him on the plane where his interests lay, and he never knew the passionate intensity of her absorption in that minor part of his life which moved on her plane. He never worried about her solitude, or guessed that in throwing her a smile and a word at supper he was paying her meagrely for three hours of lone rocking in a rocking-chair.

The worst of it was that she was quite incurable. No experience would suffice to cure her trick of continually expecting him to notice things which he never did notice. One day he said, in the midst of a silence: "By the way, didn't father leave any boxes of cigars?" She had the steps up into her bedroom and reached down from the dusty top of the wardrobe the box which she had put there after Samuel's funeral. In handing him the box she was doing a great deed. His age was nineteen, and she was ratifying his precocious habit of smoking by this solemn gift. He entirely ignored the box for several days. She said timidly: "Have you tried those cigars?" "Not yet," he replied. "I'll try 'em one of these days." Ten

days later, on a Sunday when he chanced not to have gone out with his aristocratic friend Matthew Peel-Swynnerton, he did at length open the box and take out a cigar. "Now," he observed roguishly, cutting the cigar, "we shall see, Mrs. Plover!" He often called her Mrs. Plover, for fun. Though she liked him to be sufficiently interested in her to tease her, she did not like being called Mrs. Plover, and she never failed to say: "I'm not Mrs. Plover." He smoked the cigar slowly, in the rocking-chair, throwing his head back and sending clouds to the ceiling. And afterwards he remarked: "The old man's cigars weren't so bad." "Indeed!" she answered tartly, as if maternally resenting this easy patronage. But in secret she was delighted. There was something in her son's favourable verdict on her husband's cigars that thrilled her.

She laboriously interested herself, so far as he would allow, in his artistic studies and productions. A back attic on the second floor was now transformed into a studio—a naked apartment which smelt of oil and of damp clay. Often there were traces of clay on the stairs. For working in clay he demanded of his mother a smock, and she made a smock, on the model of a genuine smock which she obtained from a country-woman who sold eggs and butter in the Covered Market. Into the shoulders of the smock she put a week's fancy-stitching, taking the pattern from an old book of embroidery. One day when he had seen her stitching morn, noon, and afternoon, at the smock, he said, as she rocked idly after supper: "I suppose you haven't forgotten all about the smock I asked you for, have you, mater?" She knew that he was teasing her; but, while perfectly realising how foolish she was, she

nearly always acted as though his teasing was serious; she picked up the smock again from the sofa. When the smock was finished he examined it intently; then exclaimed with an air of surprise: "By Jove! That's beautiful! Where did you get this pattern?" He continued to stare at it, smiling in pleasure. He turned over the tattered leaves of the embroidery-book with the same naïve, charmed astonishment, and carried the book away to the studio. "I must show that to Swynnerton," he said. As for her, the epithet 'beautiful' seemed a strange epithet to apply to a mere piece of honest stitchery done in a pattern, and a stitch with which she had been familiar all her life. The fact was she understood his 'art' less and less. The sole wall decoration of his studio was a Japanese print, which struck her as being entirely preposterous, considered as a picture. She much preferred his own early drawings of moss-roses and picturesque castles—things that he now mercilessly condemned. Later, he discovered her cutting out another smock. "What's that for?" he inquired. "Well," she said, "you can't manage with one smock. What shall you do when that one has to go to the wash?" "Wash!" he repeated vaguely. "There's no need for it to go to the wash." "Cyril," she replied, "don't try my patience! I was thinking of making you half-a-dozen." He whistled. "With all that stitching?" he questioned, amazed at the undertaking. "Why not?" she said. In her young days, no sempstress ever made fewer than half-a-dozen of anything, and it was usually a dozen; it was sometimes half-a-dozen dozen. "Well," he murmured, "you have got a nerve! I'll say that."

Similar things happened whenever he showed that



he was pleased. If he said of a dish, in the local tongue: "I could do a bit of that!" or if he simply smacked his lips over it, she would surfeit him with that dish.

## II.

On a hot day in August, just before they were to leave Bursley for a month in the Isle of Man, Cyril came home, pale and perspiring, and dropped on to the sofa. He wore a grey alpaca suit, and, except his hair, which in addition to being very untidy was damp with sweat, he was a masterpiece of slim elegance, despite the heat. He blew out great sighs, and rested his head on the antimacassared arm of the sofa.

"Well, mater," he said, in a voice of factitious calm, "I've got it." He was looking up at the ceiling.

"Got what?"

"The National Scholarship. Swynnerton says it's a sheer fluke. But I've got it. Great glory for the Bursley School of Art!"

"National Scholarship?" she said. "What's that? What is it?"

"Now, mother!" he admonished her, not without testiness. "Don't go and say I've never breathed a word about it!"

He lit a cigarette, to cover his self-consciousness, for he perceived that she was moved far beyond the ordinary.

Never, in fact, not even by the death of her husband, had she received such a frightful blow as that which the dreamy Cyril had just dealt her.

It was not a complete surprise, but it was nearly a complete surprise. A few months previously he certainly had mentioned, in his incidental way, the subject of a National Scholarship. Apropos of a drinking-cup which he had designed, he had said that the director of the School of Art had suggested that it was good enough to compete for the National, and that as he was otherwise qualified for the competition he might as well send the cup to South Kensington. He had added that Peel-Swynnerton had laughed at the notion as absurd. On that occasion she had comprehended that a National Scholarship involved residence in London. She ought to have begun to live in fear, for Cyril had a most disturbing habit of making a mere momentary reference to matters which he deemed very important and which occupied a large share of his attention. He was secretive by nature, and the rigidity of his father's rule had developed this trait in his character. But really he had spoken of the competition with such an extreme casualness that with little effort she had dismissed it from her anxieties as involving a contingency so remote as to be negligible. She had, genuinely, almost forgotten it. Only at rare intervals had it wakened in her a dull transitory pain—like the herald of a fatal malady. And, as a woman in the opening stage of disease, she had hastily reassured herself: "How silly of me! This can't possibly be anything serious!"

And now she was condemned. She knew it. She knew there could be no appeal. She knew that she might

as usefully have besought mercy from a tiler as from her good, industrious, dreamy son.

"It means a pound a week," said Cyril, his self-consciousness intensified by her silence and by the dreadful look on her face. "And of course free tuition."

"For how long?" she managed to say.

"Well," said he, "that depends. Nominally for a year. But if you behave yourself it's always continued for three years."

If he stayed for three years he would never come back: that was a certainty.

With what futile and bitter execration she murmured in her heart the word "If." If Cyril's childish predilections had not been encouraged! If he had only been content to follow his father's trade! If she had flatly refused to sign his indenture at Peel's and pay the premium! If he had not turned from colour to clay! If the art-master had not had that fatal "idea!" If the judges for the competition had decided otherwise! If only she had brought Cyril up in habits of obedience, sacrificing temporary peace to permanent security!

For after all he could not abandon her without her consent. He was not of age. And he would want a lot more money, which he could obtain from none but her. She could refuse. . . . No! She could not refuse. He was the master, the tyrant. For the sake of daily pleasantness she had weakly yielded to him at the start! She had behaved badly to herself and to him. He was spoiled. She had spoiled him. And he was about to repay her with lifelong misery, and nothing would deflect

him from his course. The usual conduct of the spoilt child! Had she not witnessed it, and moralised upon it, in other families?

"You don't seem very chirpy over it, mater!" he said.

She went out of the room. His joy in the prospect of departure from the Five Towns, from her, though he masked it, was more manifest than she could bear.

The *Signal*, the next day, made a special item of the news. It appeared that no National Scholarship had been won in the Five Towns for eleven years. The citizens were exhorted to remember that Mr. Povey had gained his success in open competition with the cleverest young students of the entire kingdom—and in a branch of art which he had but recently taken up; and further, that the Government offered only eight scholarships each year. The name of Cyril Povey passed from lip to lip. And nobody who met Constance, in street or shop, could refrain from informing her that she ought to be a proud mother, to have such a son, but that truly they were not surprised . . . and how proud his poor father would have been! A few sympathetically hinted that maternal pride was one of those luxuries that may cost too dear.

## III.

The holiday in the Isle of Man was of course ruined for her. She could scarcely walk because of the weight of a lump of lead that she carried in her bosom. On the brightest days the lump of lead was always there. Besides, she was so obese. In ordinary circumstances they might have stayed beyond the month. An indentured pupil is not strapped to the wheel like a common apprentice. Moreover, the indentures were to be cancelled. But Constance did not care to stay. She had to prepare for his departure to London. She had to lay the faggots for her own martyrdom.

The day came when on that day week Cyril would be gone. Constance steadily fabricated cheerfulness against the prospect. She said:

"Suppose I come with you?"

He smiled in toleration of this joke as being a passable quality of joke. And then she smiled in the same sense, hastening to agree with him that as a joke it was not a bad joke.

In the last week he was very loyal to his tailor. Many a young man would have commanded new clothes after, not before, his arrival in London. But Cyril had faith in his creator.

On the day of departure the household, the very house itself, was in a state of excitation. He was to leave early. He would not listen to the project of her accompanying him as far as Knype, where the Loop Line joined the

main. She might go to Bursley Station and no further. When she rebelled he disclosed the merest hint of his sullen-churlish side, and she at once yielded. During breakfast she did not cry, but the aspect of her face made him protest.

"Now, look here, mater! Just try to remember that I shall be back for Christmas. It's hardly three months." And he lit a cigarette.

She made no reply.

Amy lugged a Gladstone bag down the crooked stairs. A trunk was already close to the door; it had wrinkled the carpet and deranged the mat.

"You didn't forget to put the hair-brush in, did you, Amy?" he asked.

"N—no, Mr. Cyril," she blubbered.

"Amy!" Constance sharply corrected her, as Cyril ran upstairs, "I wonder you can't control yourself better than that."

The cab came. Cyril tumbled downstairs with exaggerated carelessness, and with exaggerated carelessness he joked at the cabman.

"Now, mother!" he cried, when the luggage was stowed. "Do you want me to miss this train?" But he knew that the margin of time was ample. It was his fun!

"Nay, I can't be hurried!" she said, fixing her bonnet. "Amy, as soon as we are gone you can clear this table."

She climbed heavily into the cab.

"That's it! Smash the springs!" Cyril teased her.

The horse got a stinging cut to recall him to the seriousness of life. It was a fine, bracing autumn morning, and the driver felt the need of communicating his abundant energy to someone or something. They drove off, Amy staring after them from the door. Matters had been so marvellously well arranged that they arrived at the station twenty minutes before the train was due.

"Never mind!" Cyril mockingly comforted his mother. "You'd rather be twenty minutes too soon than one minute too late, wouldn't you?"

His high spirits had to come out somehow.

Gradually the minutes passed, and the empty slate-tinted platform became dotted with people to whom that train was nothing but a Loop Line train, people who took that train every week-day of their lives and knew all its eccentricities.

And they heard the train whistle as it started from Turnhill. And Cyril had a final word with the porter who was in charge of the luggage. He made a handsome figure, and he had twenty pounds in his pocket. When he returned to Constance she was sniffing, and through her veil he could see that her eyes were circled with red. But through her veil she could see nothing. The train rolled in, rattling to a standstill. Constance lifted her veil and kissed him; and kissed her life out. He smelt the odour of her crape. He was, for an instant, close to her, close; and he seemed to have an overwhelmingly intimate glimpse into her secrets; he seemed to be choked in the sudden strong emotion of that crape. He felt queer.

"Here you are, sir! Second smoker!" called the porter.

The daily frequenters of the train boarded it with their customary disgust.

"I'll write as soon as ever I get there!" said Cyril, of his own accord. It was the best he could muster.

With what grace he raised his hat!

A sliding-away; clouds of steam; and she shared the dead platform with milk-cans, two porters, and Smith's noisy boy!

She walked home, very slowly and painfully. The lump of lead was heavier than ever before. And the townspeople saw the proudest mother in Bursley walking home!

"After all," she argued with her soul angrily, petulantly, "could you expect the boy to do anything else? He is a serious student, he has had a brilliant success, and is he to be tied to your apron-strings? The idea is preposterous. It isn't as if he was an idler, or a bad son. No mother could have a better son. A nice thing, that he should stay all his life in Bursley simply because you don't like being left alone!"

Unfortunately one might as well argue with a mule as with one's soul. Her soul only kept on saying monotonously: "I'm a lonely old woman now. I've nothing to live for any more, and I'm no use to anybody. Once I was young and proud. And this is what my life has come to! This is the end!"

When she reached home, Amy had not touched the breakfast things; the carpet was still wrinkled, and the



mat still out of place. And, through the desolating atmosphere of reaction after a terrific crisis, she marched directly upstairs, entered his plundered room, and beheld the disorder of the bed in which he had slept.

END OF VOL. I.

PRINTING OFFICE OF THE PUBLISHER.